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(54) **ORAL CARE IMPLEMENT**

(75) Inventors: **Robert Moskovich**, East Brunswick, NJ (US); **Kenneth Waguespack**, North Brunswick, NJ (US); **Bruce M. Russell**, Howell, NJ (US)

(73) Assignee: **Colgate-Palmolive Company**, New York, NY (US)

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See application file for complete search history.

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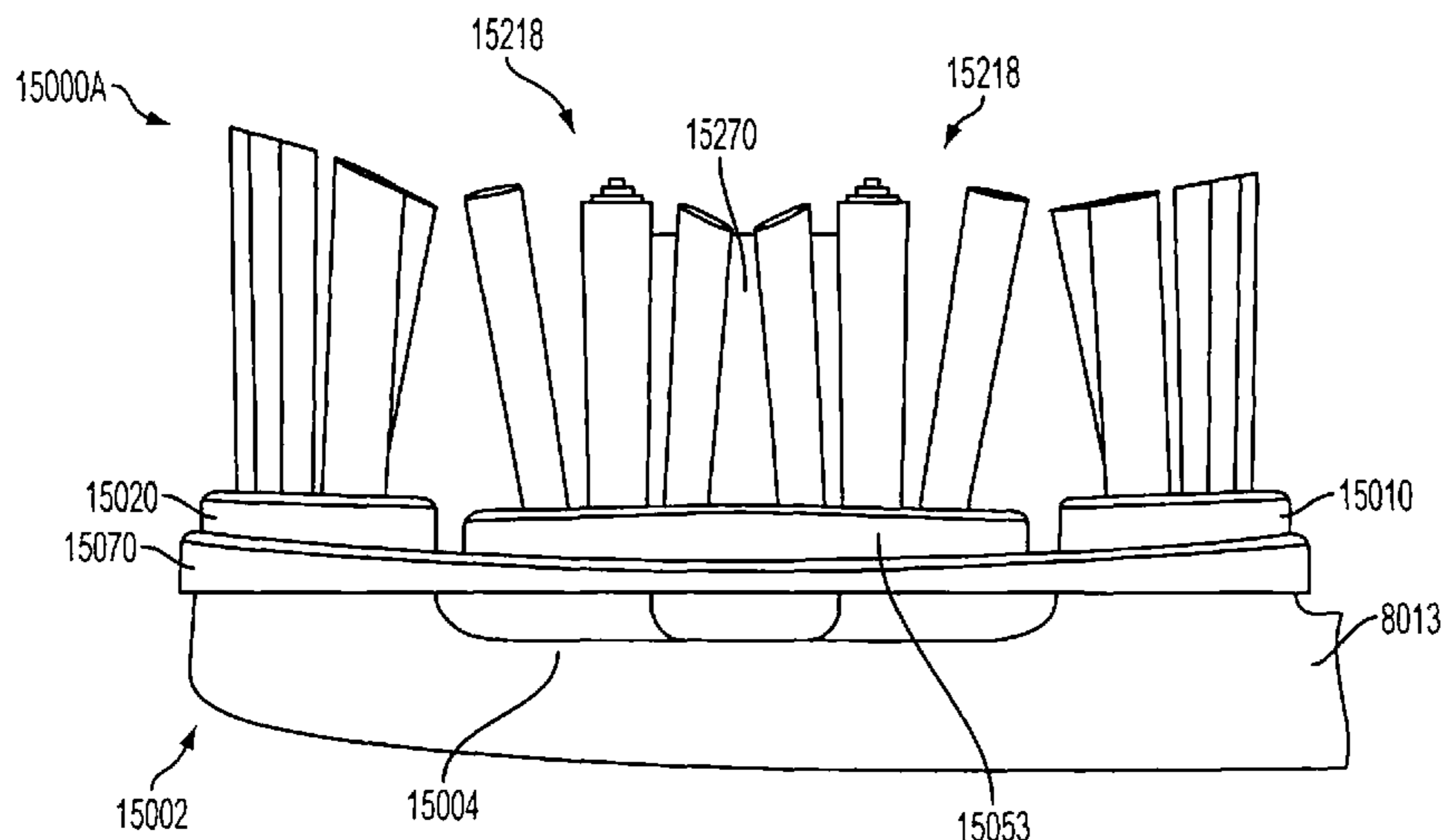
Primary Examiner — Mark Spisich

Assistant Examiner — Michael Jennings

(57) **ABSTRACT**

An oral care implement is provided having a handle and a head with tooth cleaning elements extending from fixed pods. Additional tooth cleaning elements extend from one or more central pods suspended between the fixed pods via a bridge. The bridge may be formed from an elastomer and permit the one or more central pods to move from an initial position toward the head during use. The central pods, the bridge and outer portions of the fixed pods may be formed as a unitary structure. When a single central pod is employed, a flexible section may be disposed in the middle of the central pod so that cleaning elements extending from either end of the central pod can move toward one another during use.

26 Claims, 20 Drawing Sheets



Related U.S. Application Data

filed on Jan. 30, 2004, now Pat. No. 7,703,163, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/697,213, filed on Oct. 30, 2003, now Pat. No. 7,757,326, application No. 12/576,445, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 11/019,671, filed on Dec. 23, 2004, now Pat. No. 7,721,376, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/869,922, filed on Jun. 18, 2004, now Pat. No. 7,143,462, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/601,106, filed on Jun. 20, 2003, now abandoned, said application No. 11/019,671 is a continuation-in-part of application No. PCT/US03/30633, filed on Sep. 26, 2003, and a continuation-in-part of application No. PCT/US03/29497, filed on Sep. 17, 2003, and a continuation-in-part of application No. 29/189,729, filed on Sep. 10, 2003, now Pat. No. Des. 517,812, and a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/989,267, filed on Nov. 17, 2004, now Pat. No. 7,607,189, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 29/209,242, filed on Jul. 14, 2004, now abandoned, application No. 12/576,445, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/989,267, filed on Nov. 17, 2004, now Pat. No. 7,607,189, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 29/209,242, filed on Jul. 14, 2004, now abandoned, and a continuation-in-part of application No. 29/209,244, filed on Jul. 14, 2004, now abandoned, application No. 12/576,445, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 10/902,257, filed on Jul. 30, 2004, now Pat. No. 7,047,591, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. PCT/US03/29497, filed on Sep. 17, 2003, and a continuation-in-part of application No. 29/189,729, filed on Sep. 10, 2003, now Pat. No. Des. 517,812, application No. 12/576,445, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 11/053,583, filed on Feb. 8, 2005, now Pat. No. 7,360,270, which is a continuation of application No. PCT/US03/24878, filed on Aug. 8, 2003, application No. 12/576,445, which is a continuation-in-part of application No. 11/053,589, filed on Feb. 8, 2005, now Pat. No. 7,725,981, which is a continuation of application No. PCT/US03/24879, filed on Aug. 8, 2003, Substitute for application No. 60/402,170, filed on Aug. 9, 2002.

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			WO	WO 92/17093	10/1992

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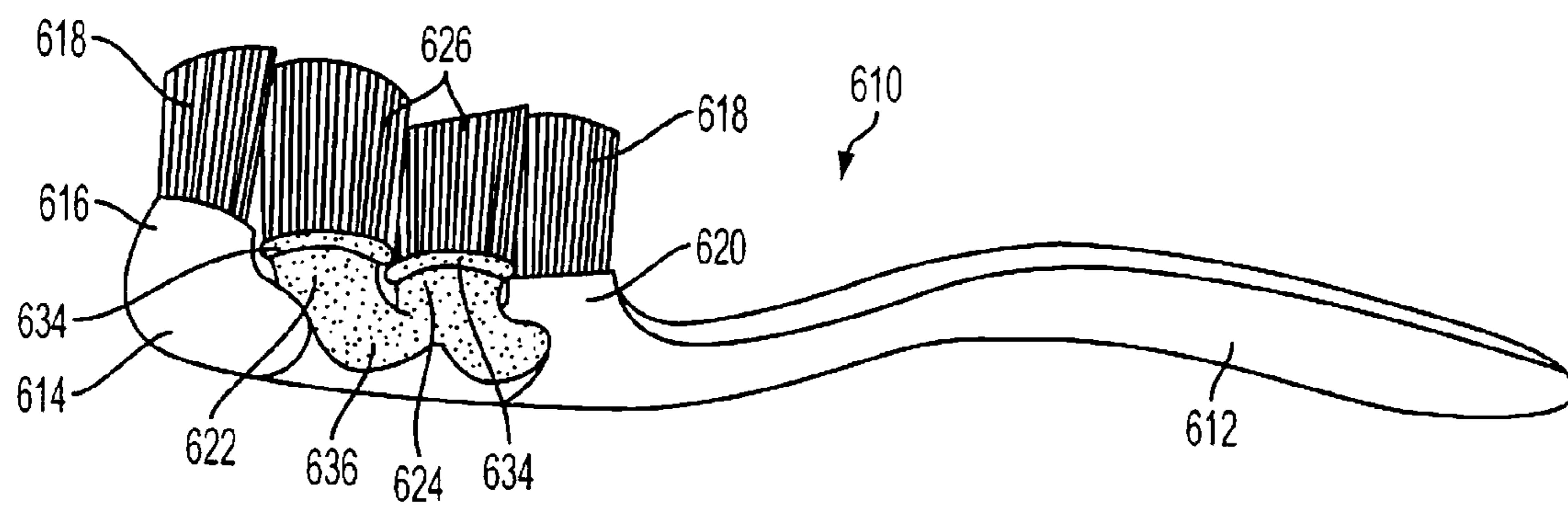


FIG. 1



FIG. 2

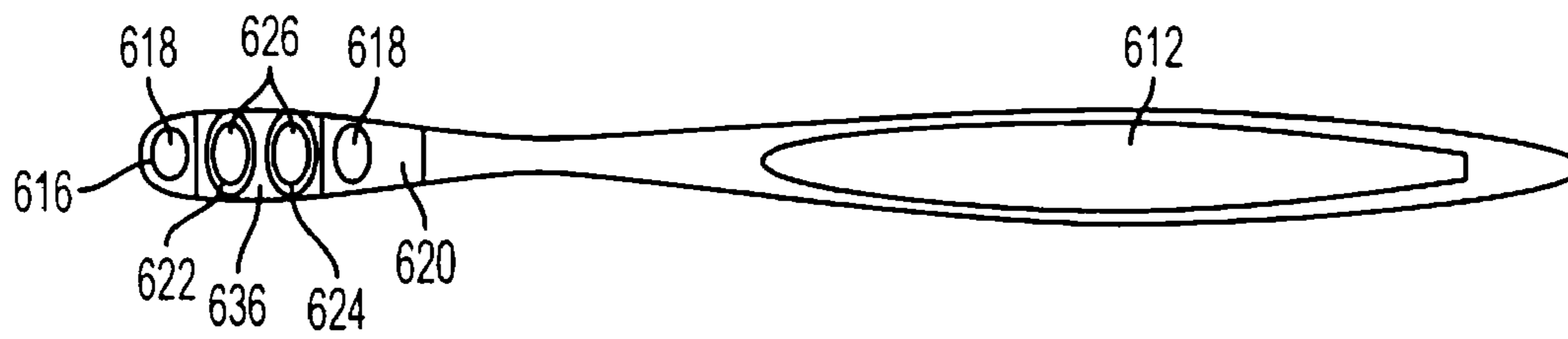


FIG. 3

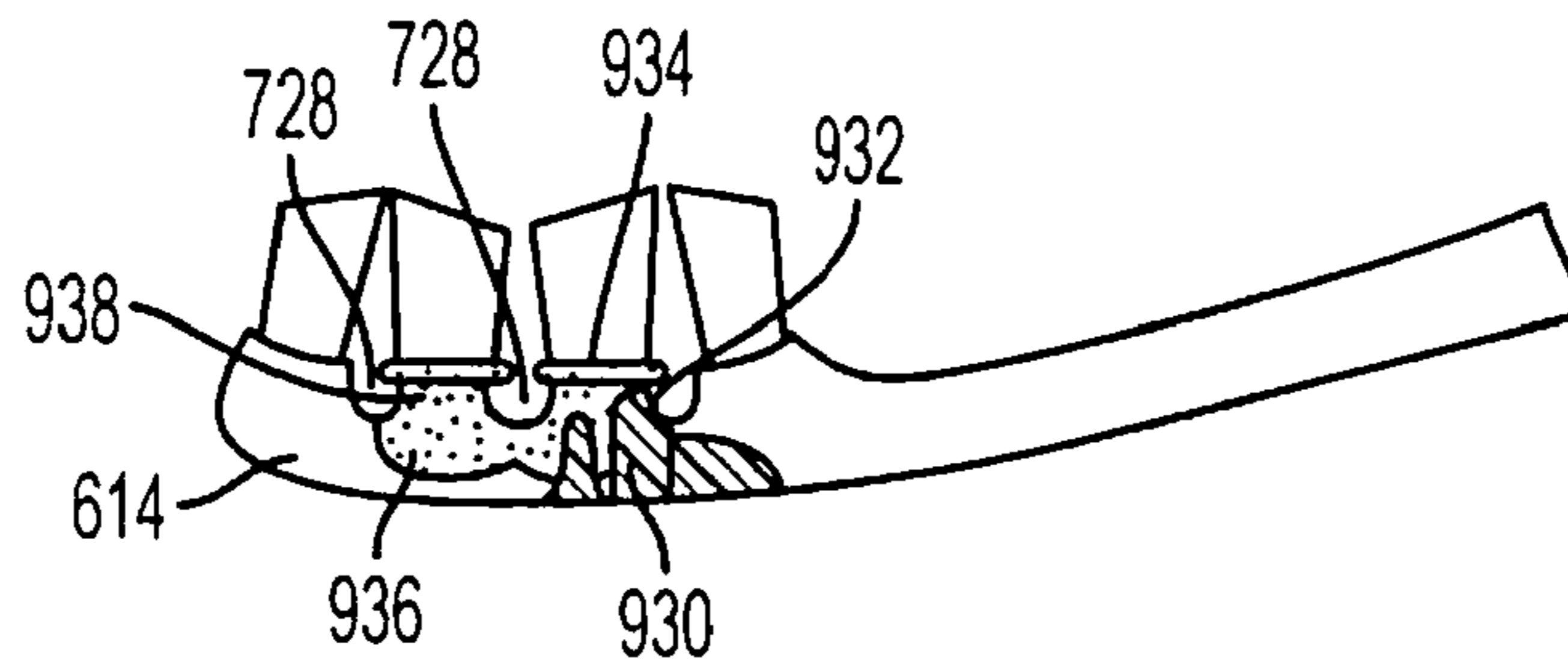


FIG. 4

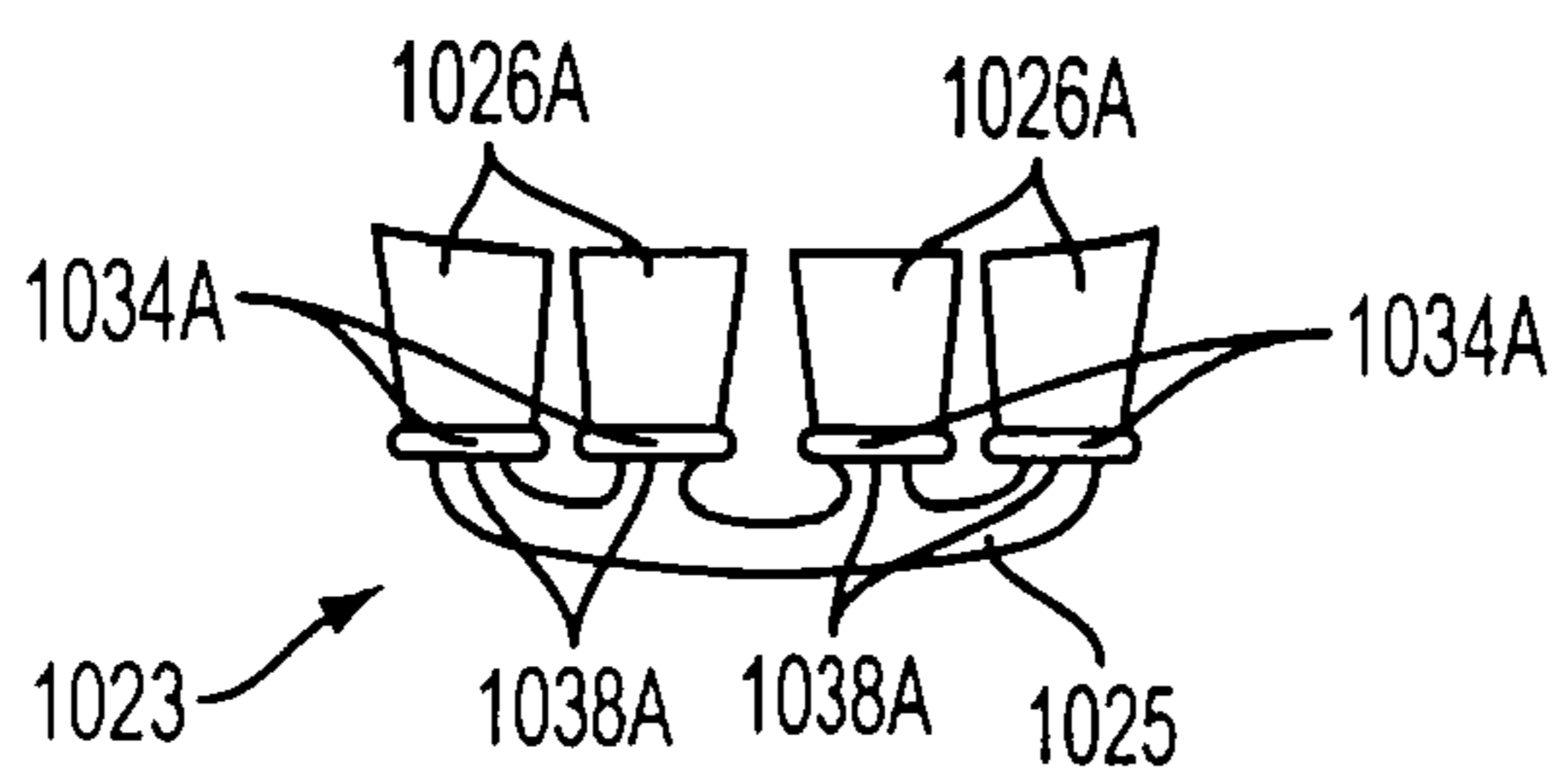


FIG. 5

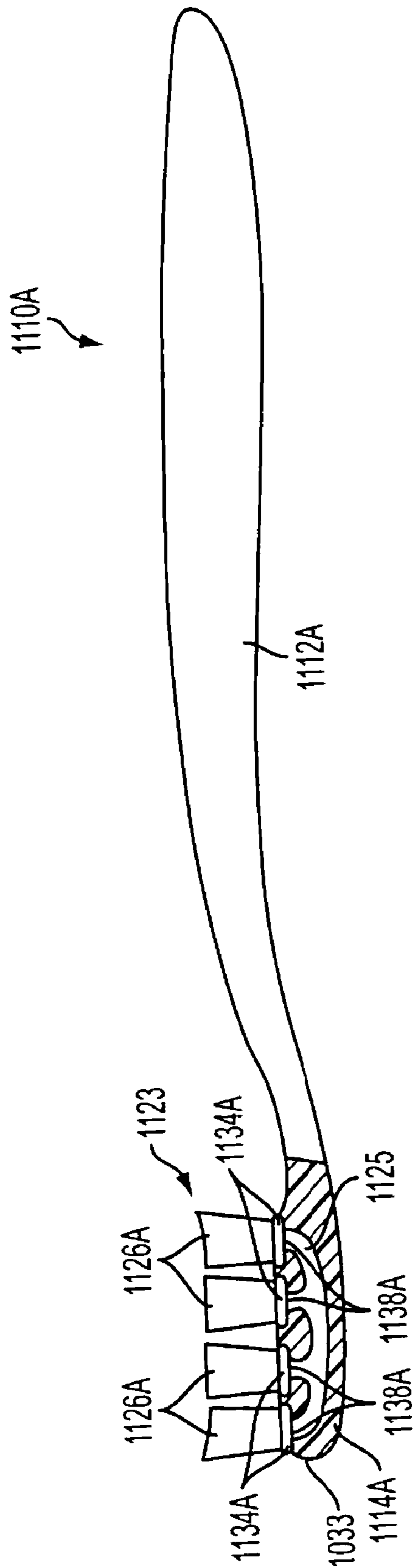


FIG. 6

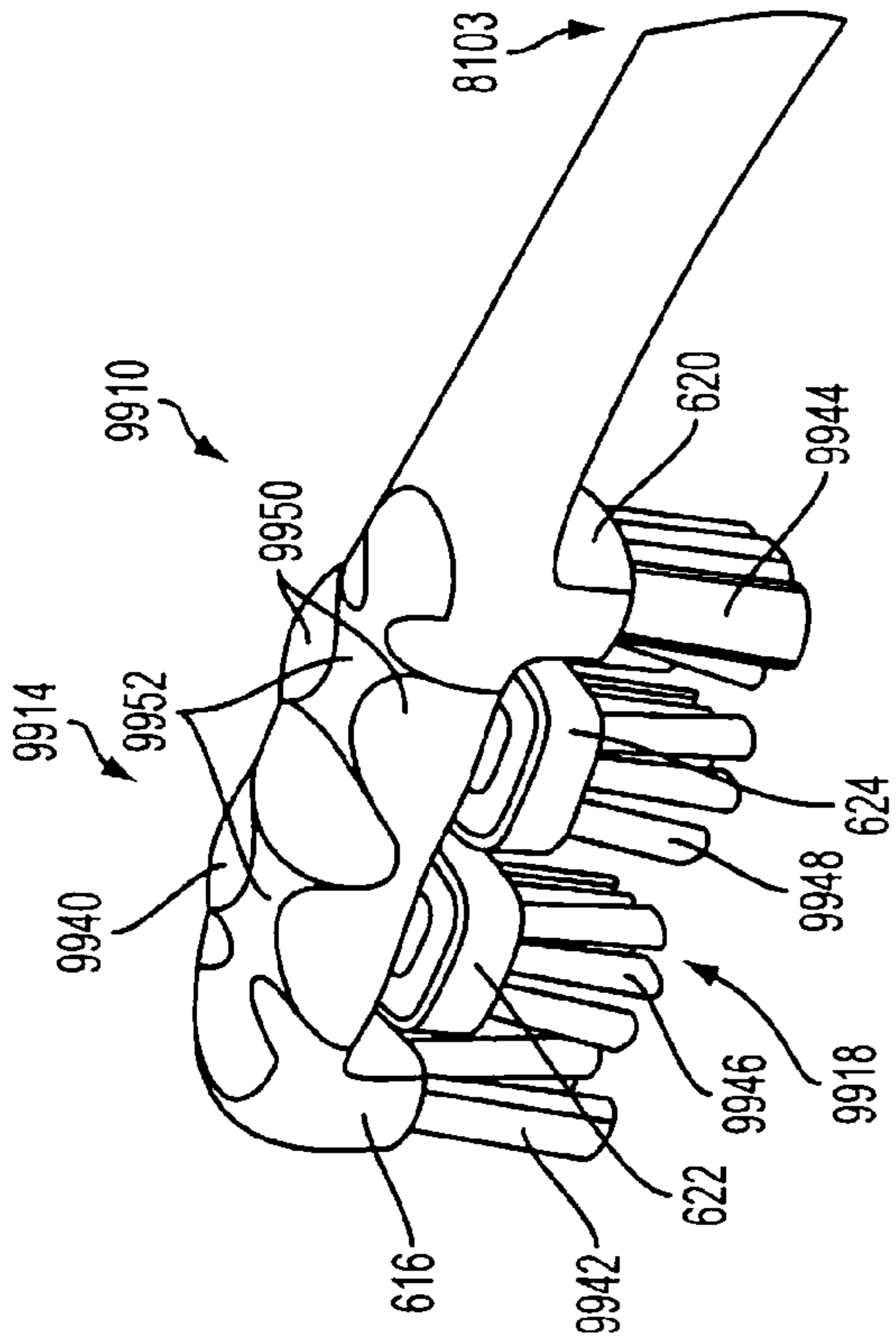


FIG. 7

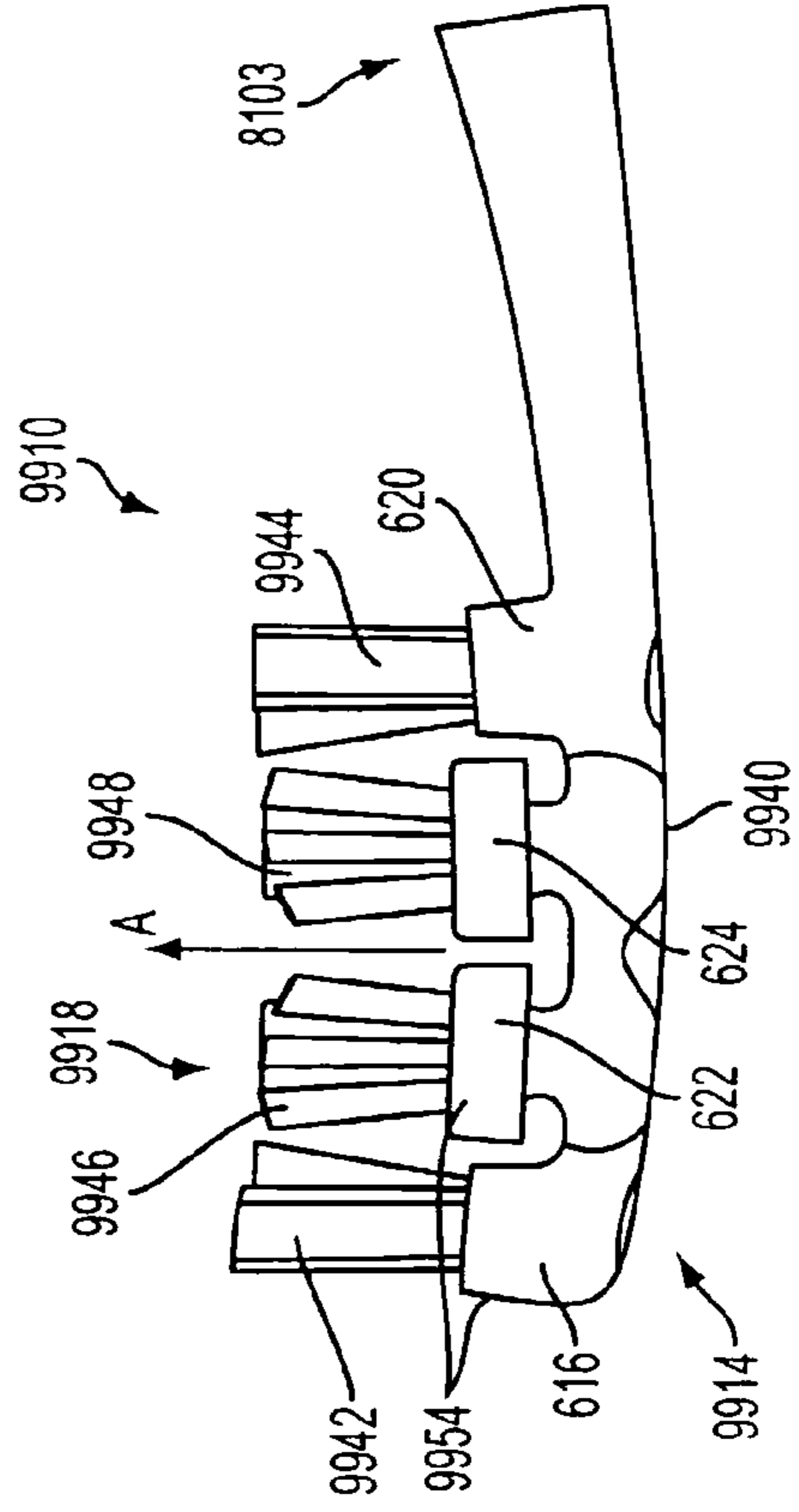


FIG. 8

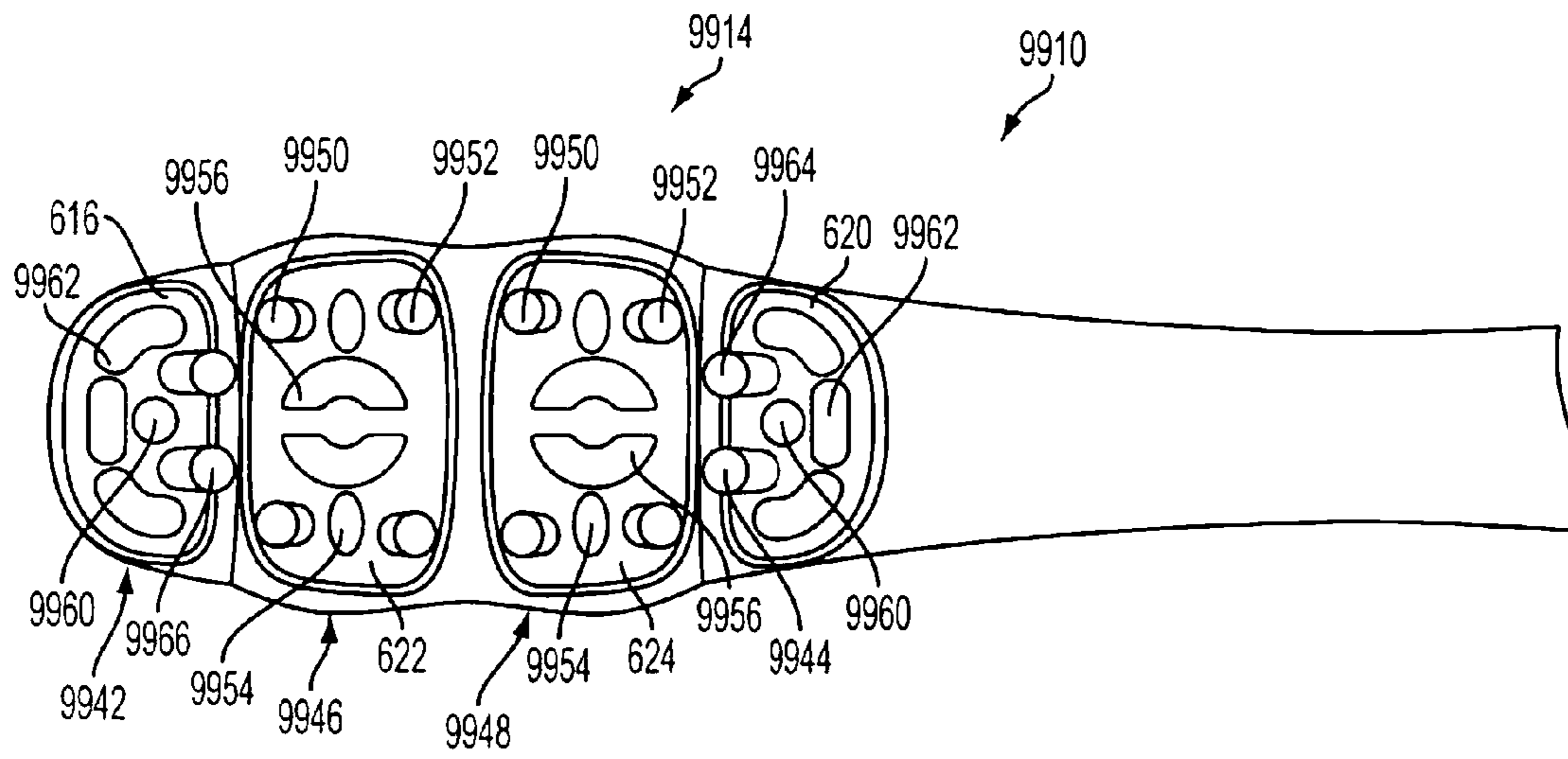


FIG. 9

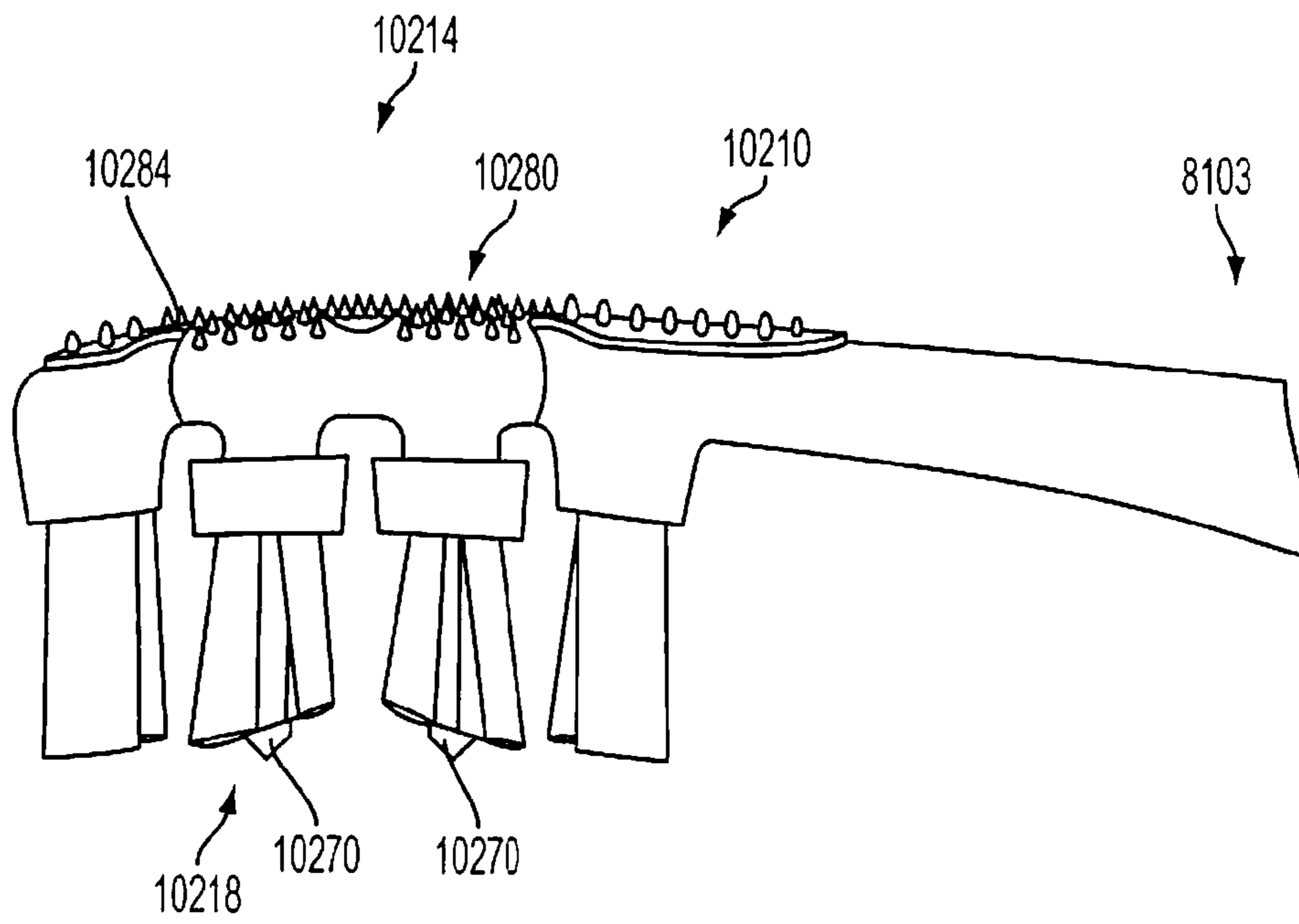


FIG. 10

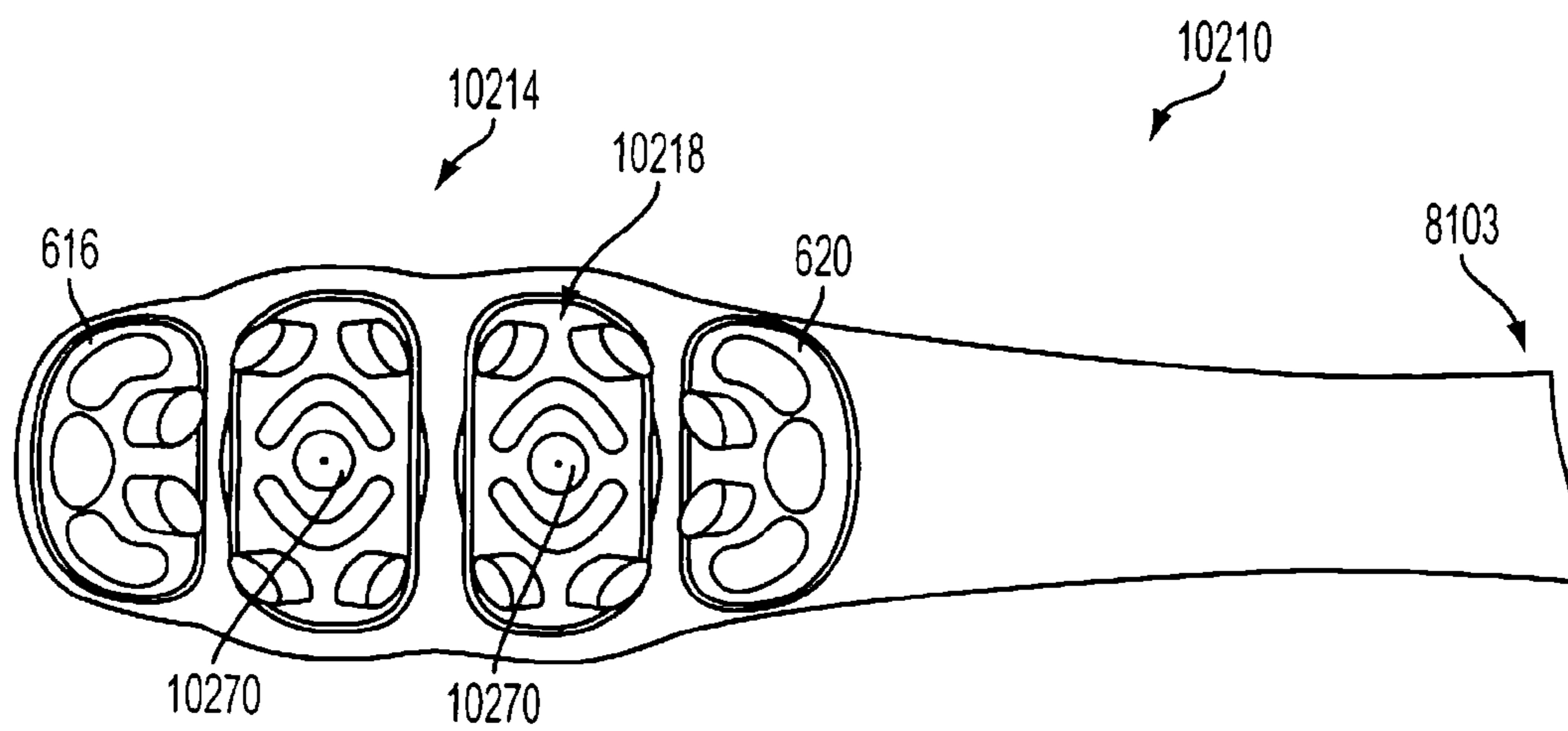


FIG. 11

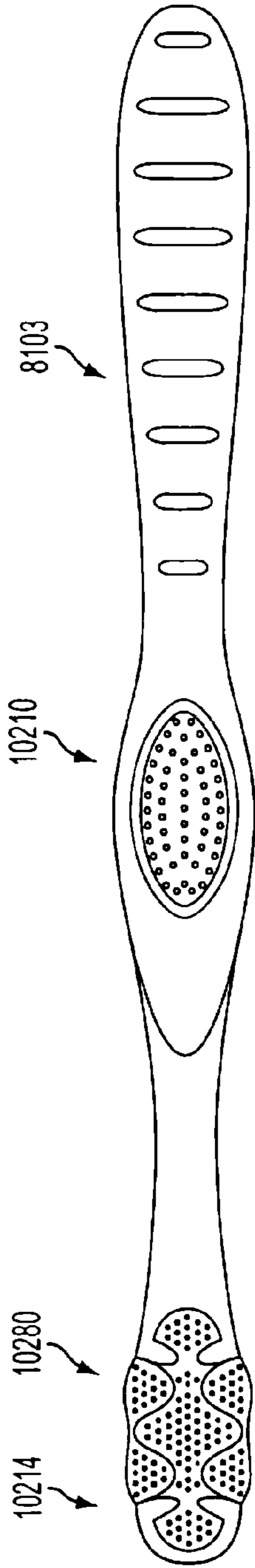


FIG. 12

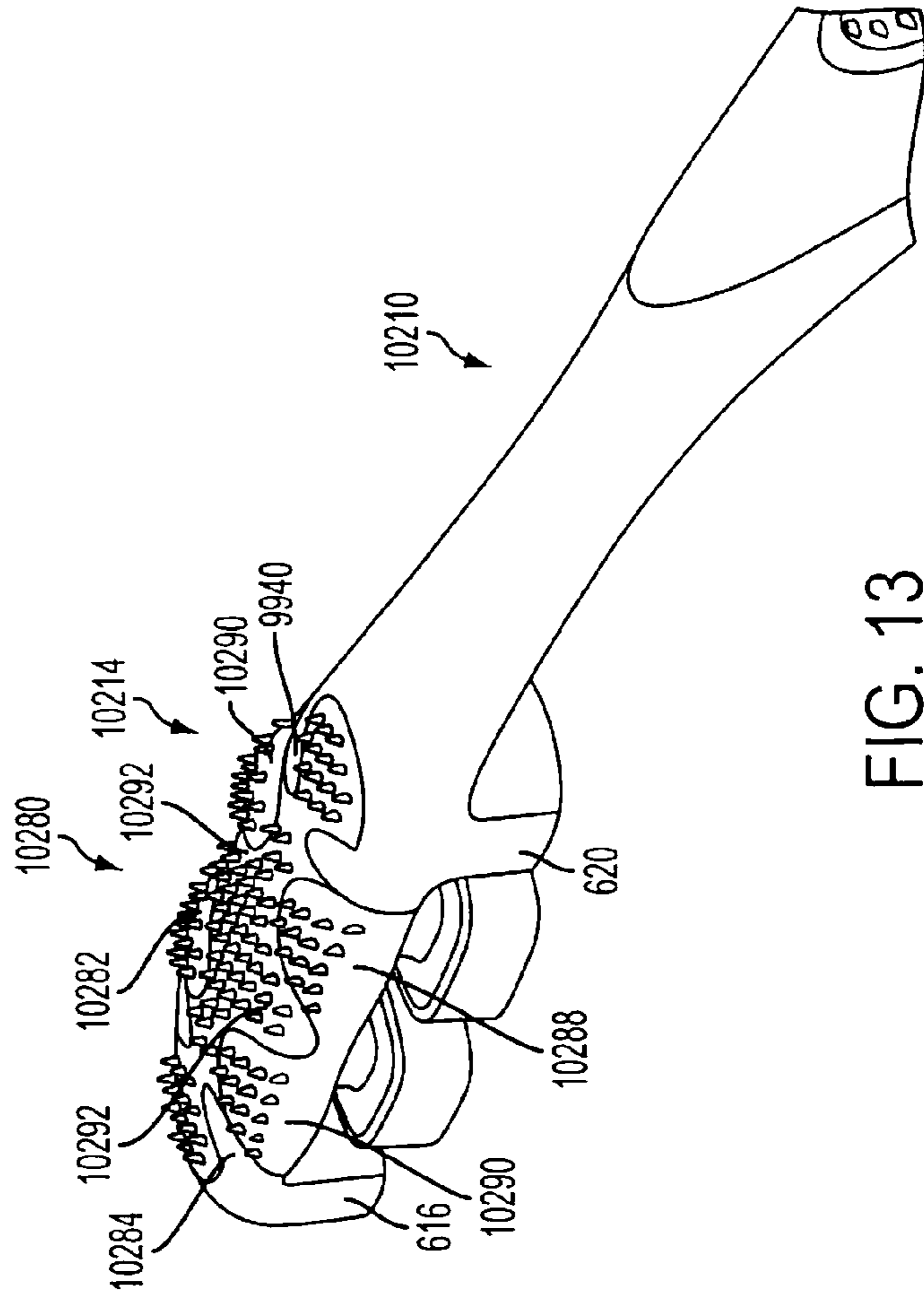


FIG. 13

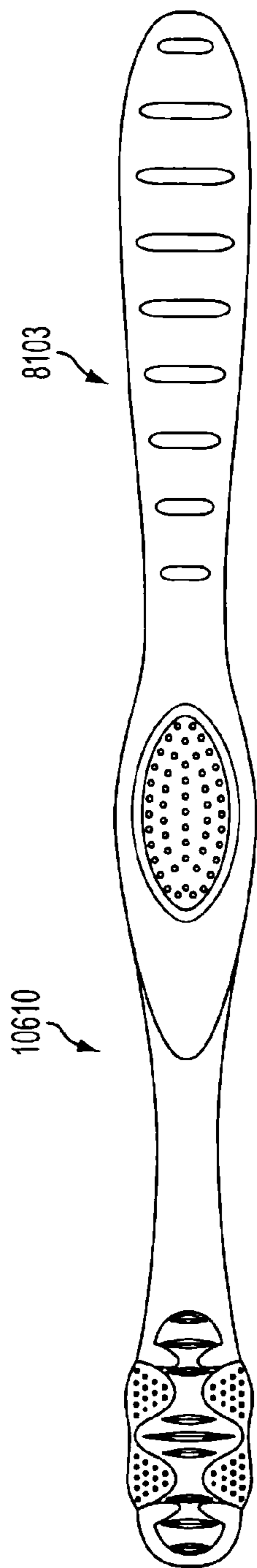


FIG. 14

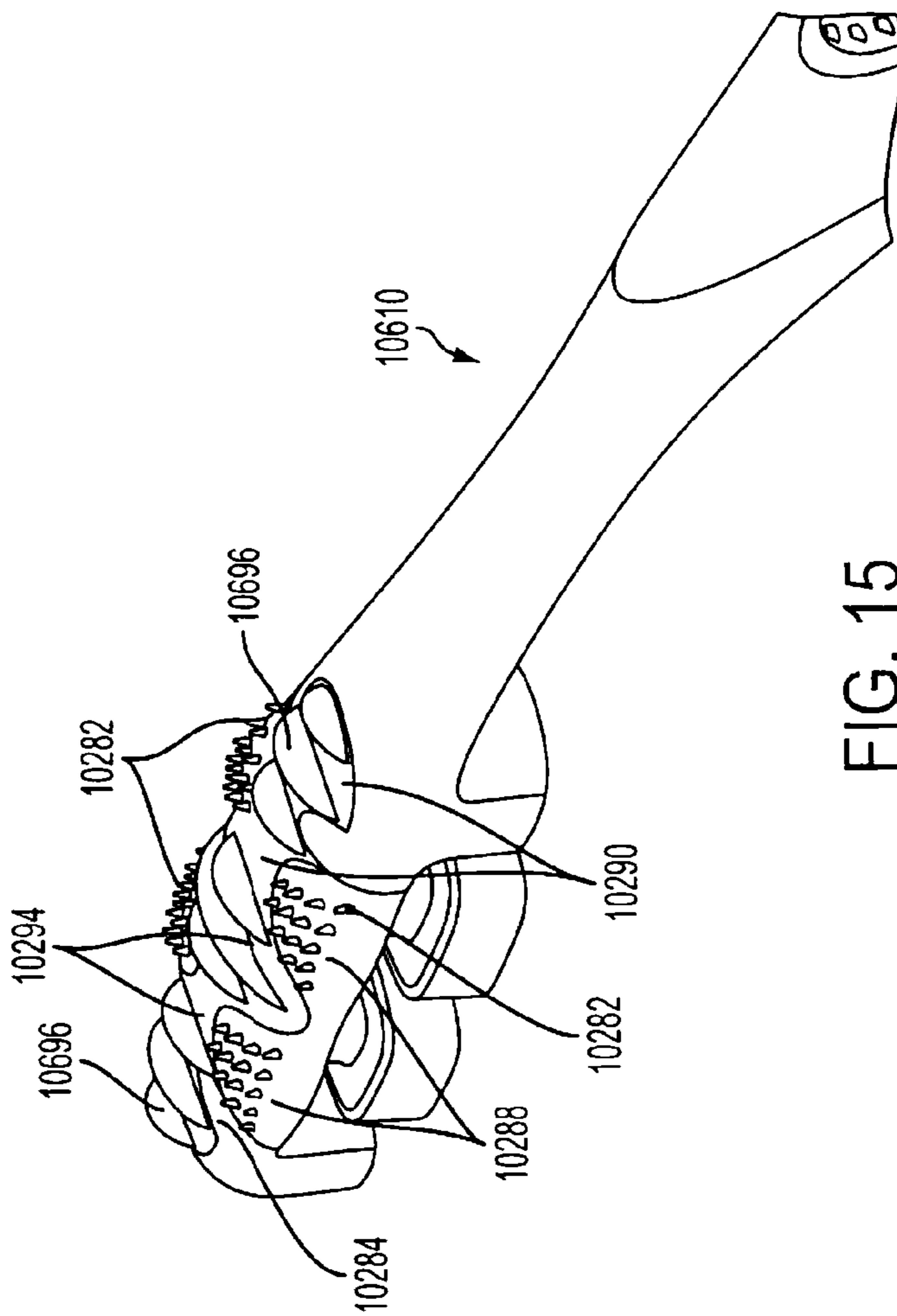


FIG. 15

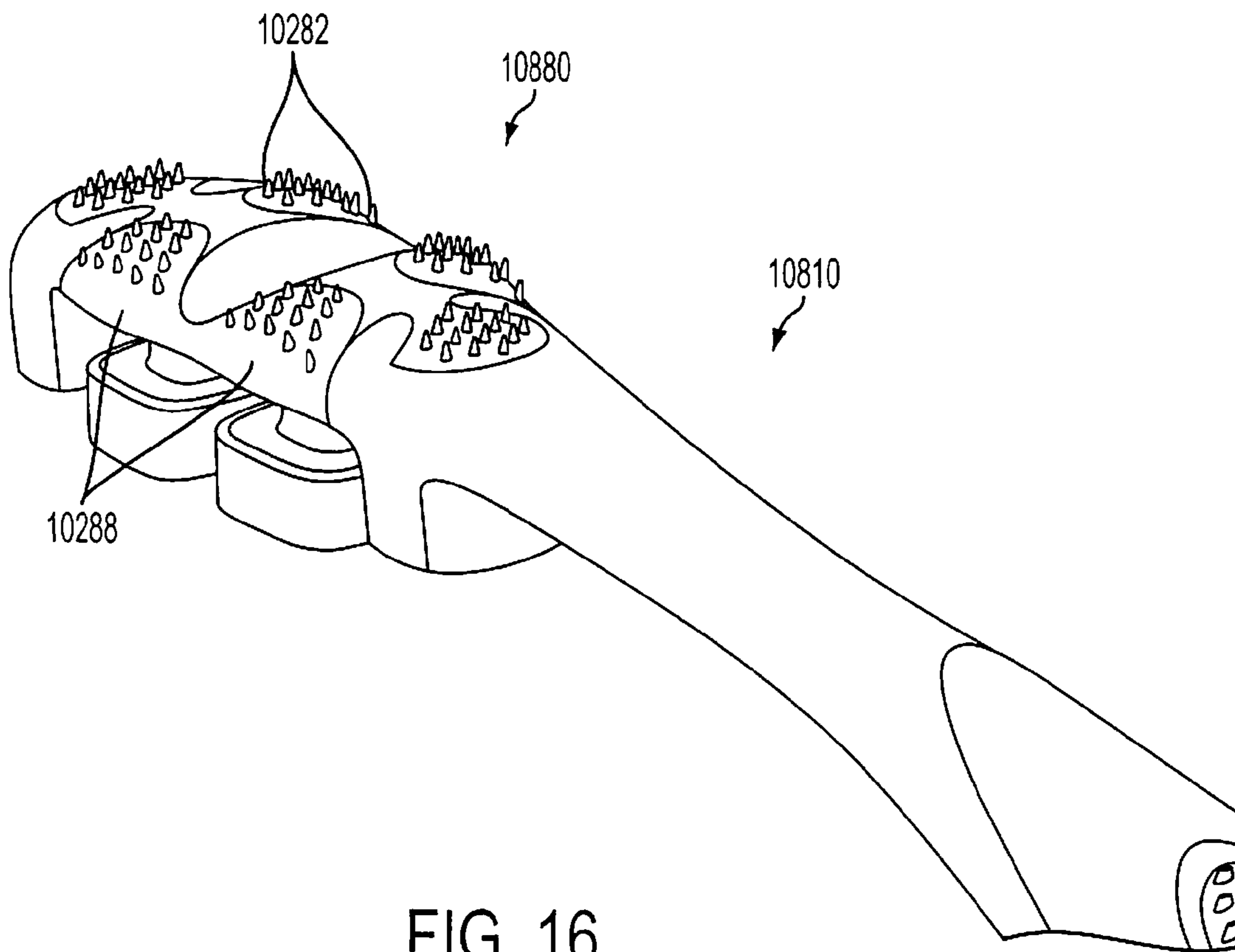


FIG. 16

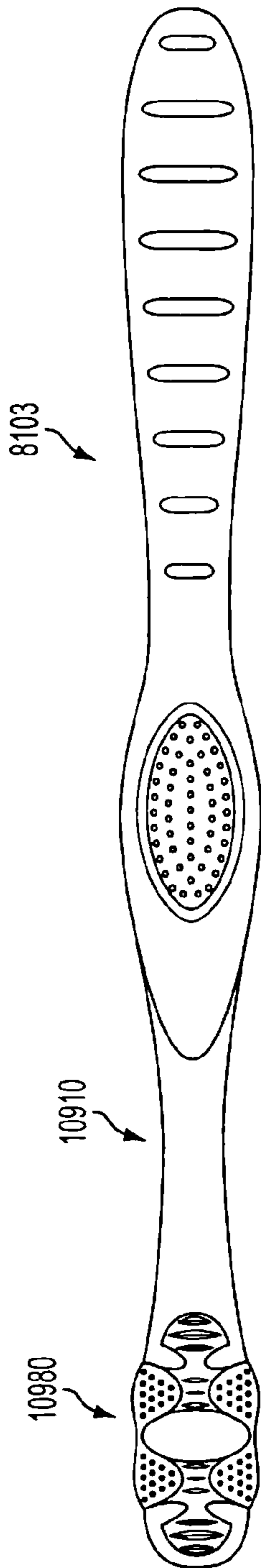


FIG. 17

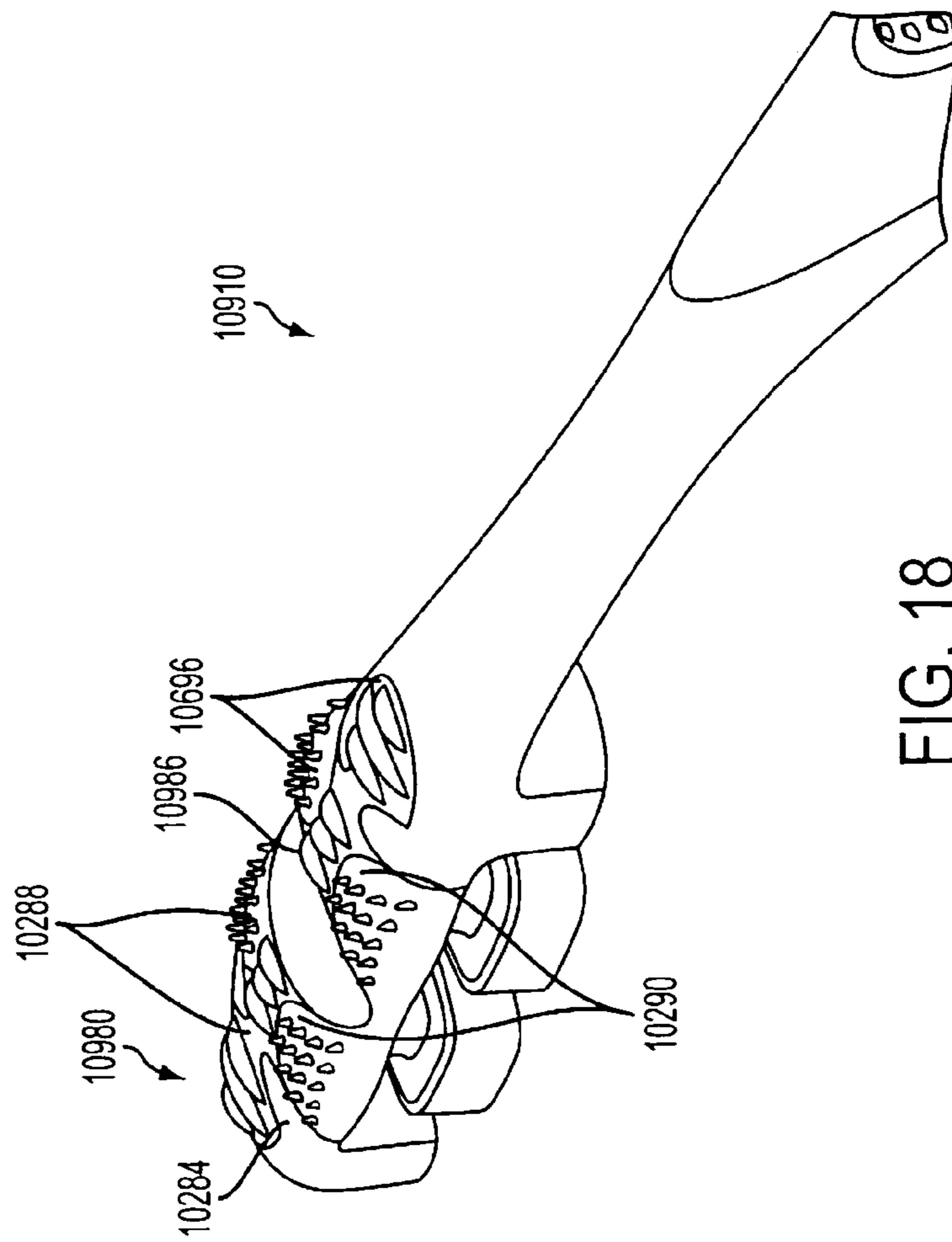


FIG. 18

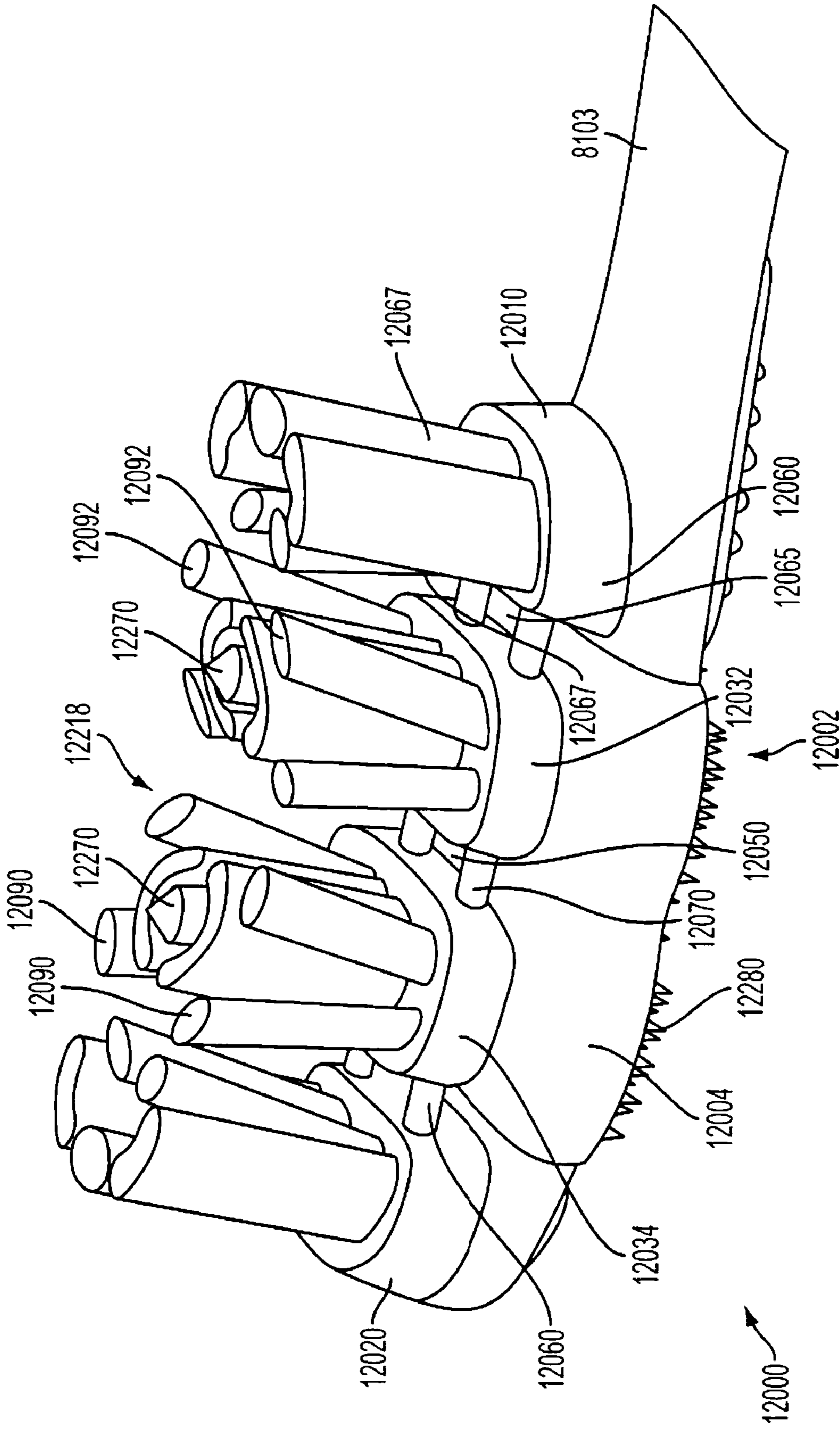


FIG. 19

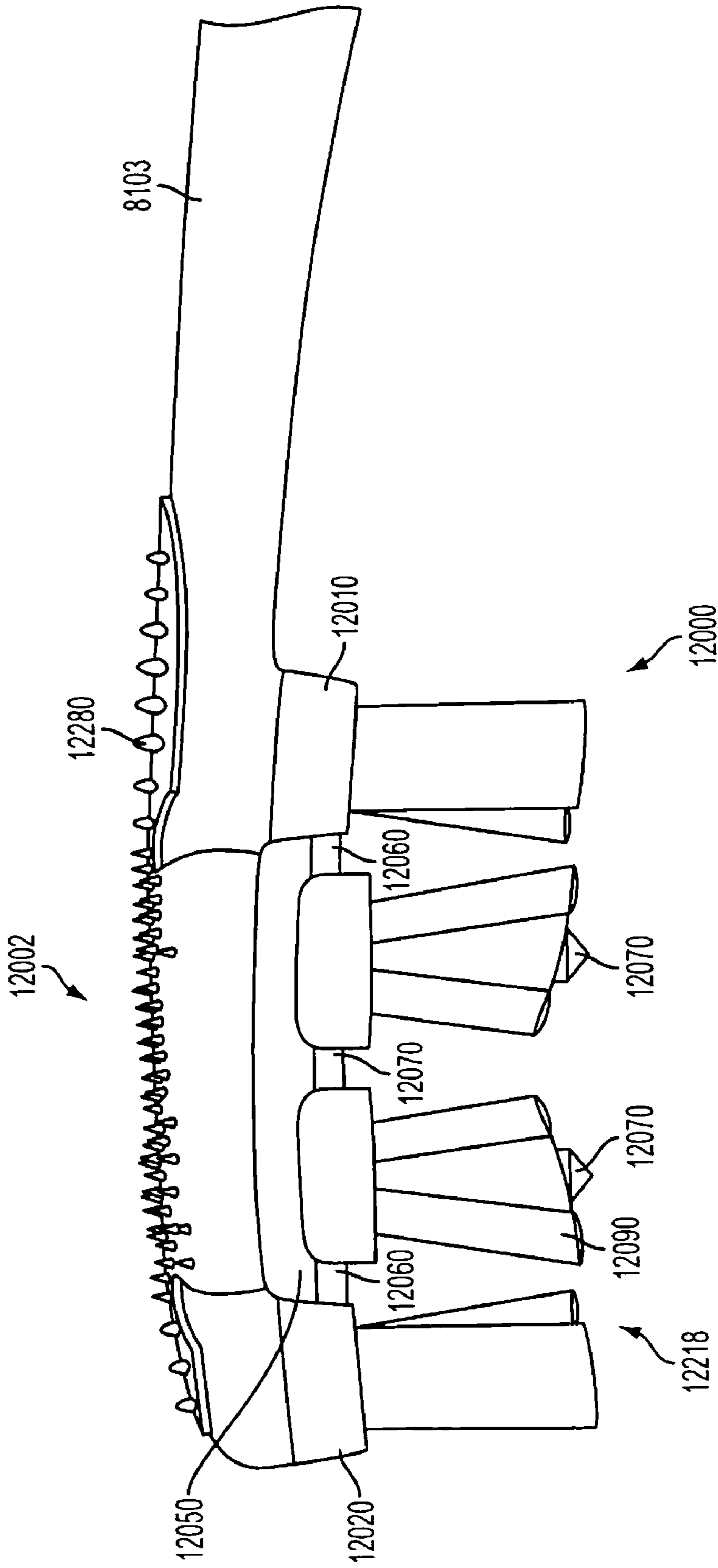


FIG. 20

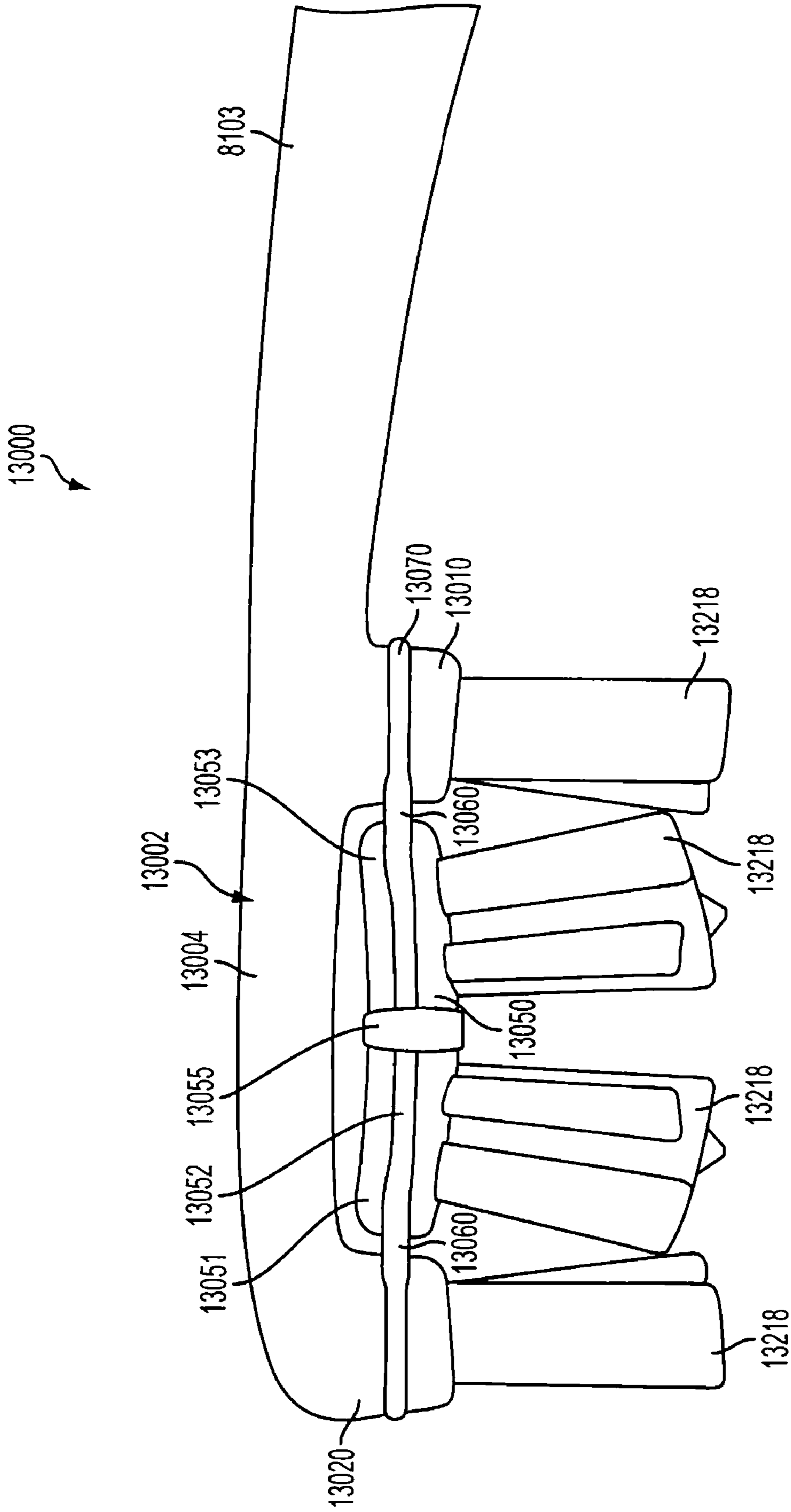


FIG. 21

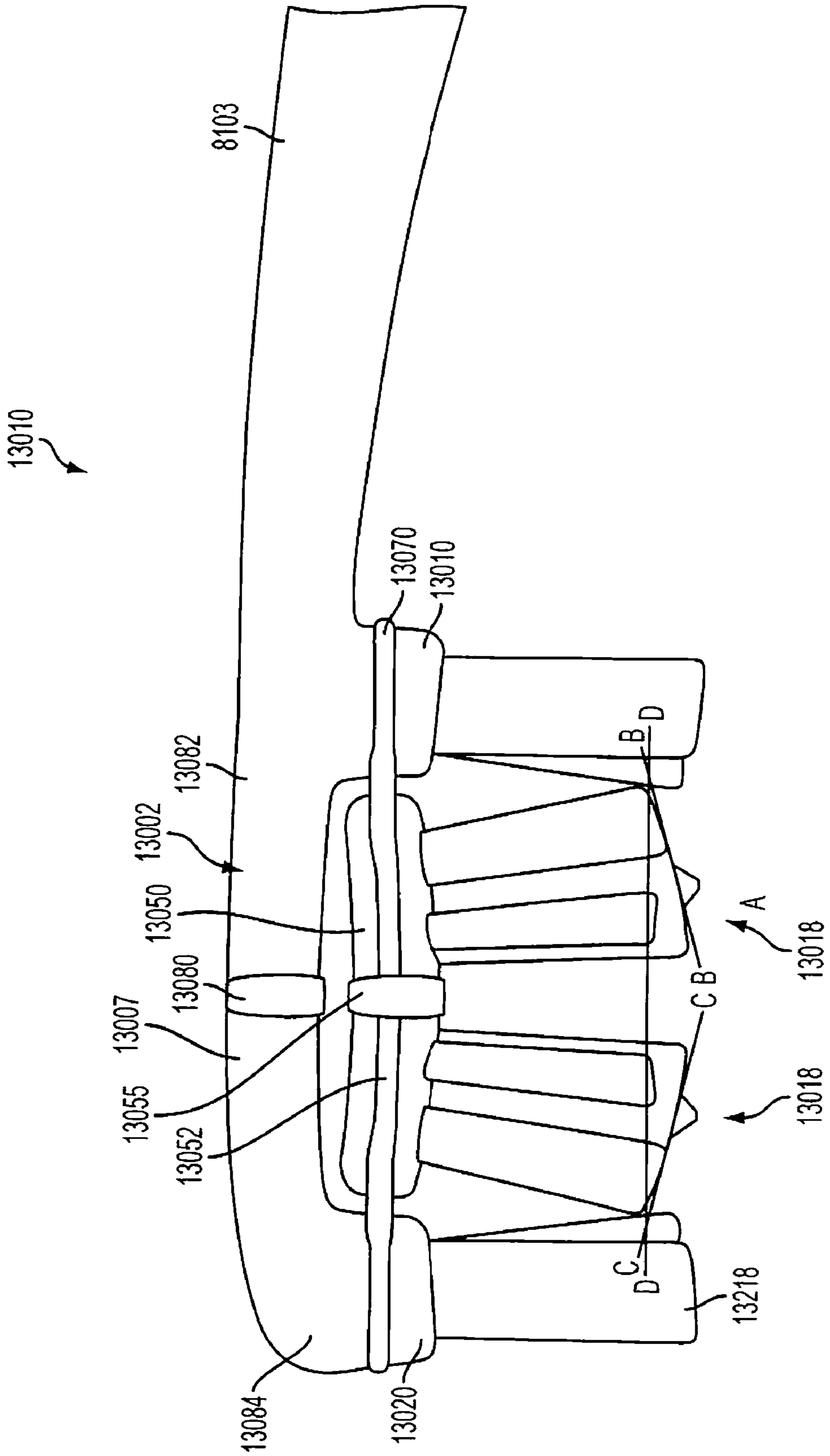


FIG. 22A

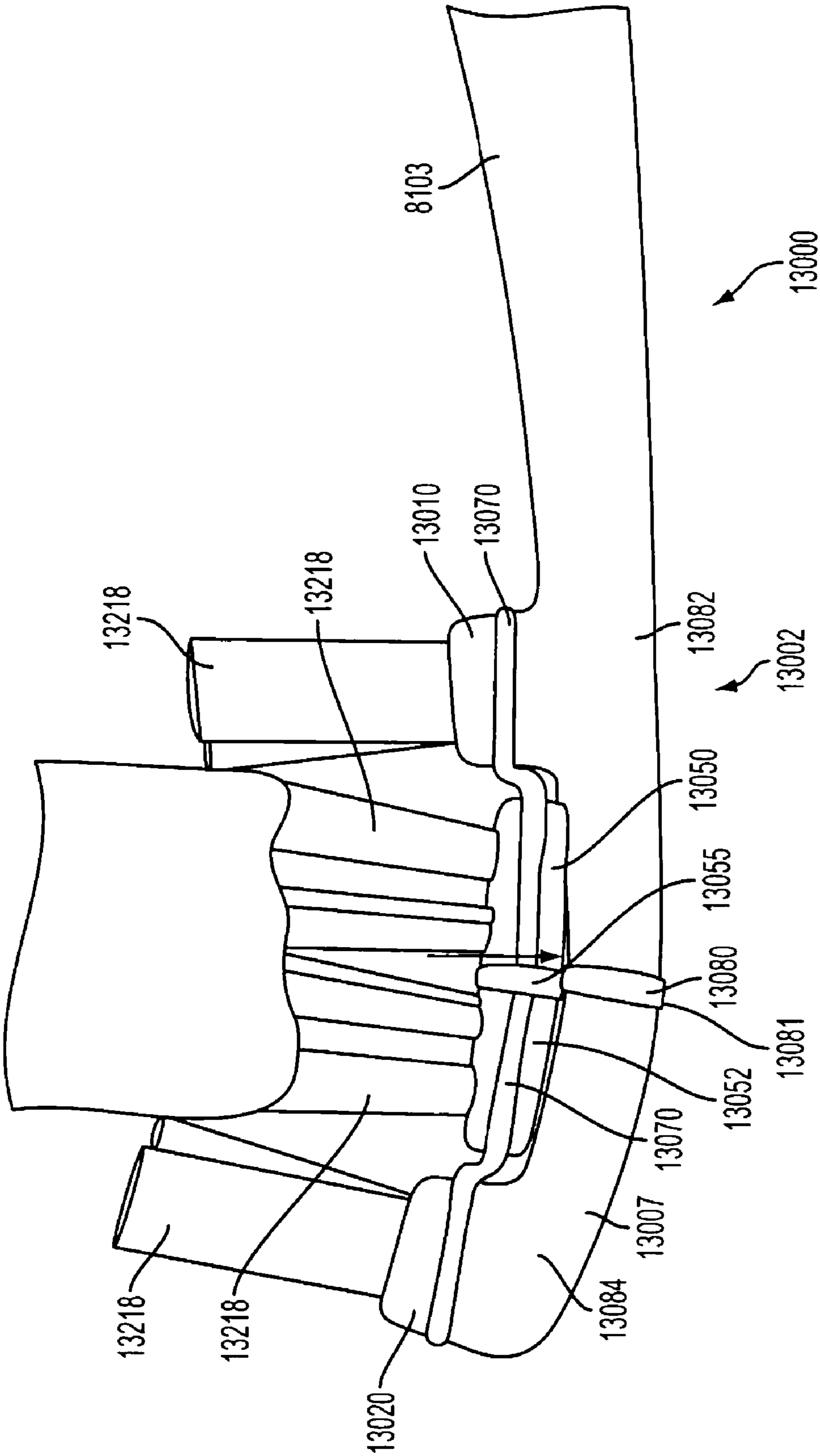


FIG. 22B

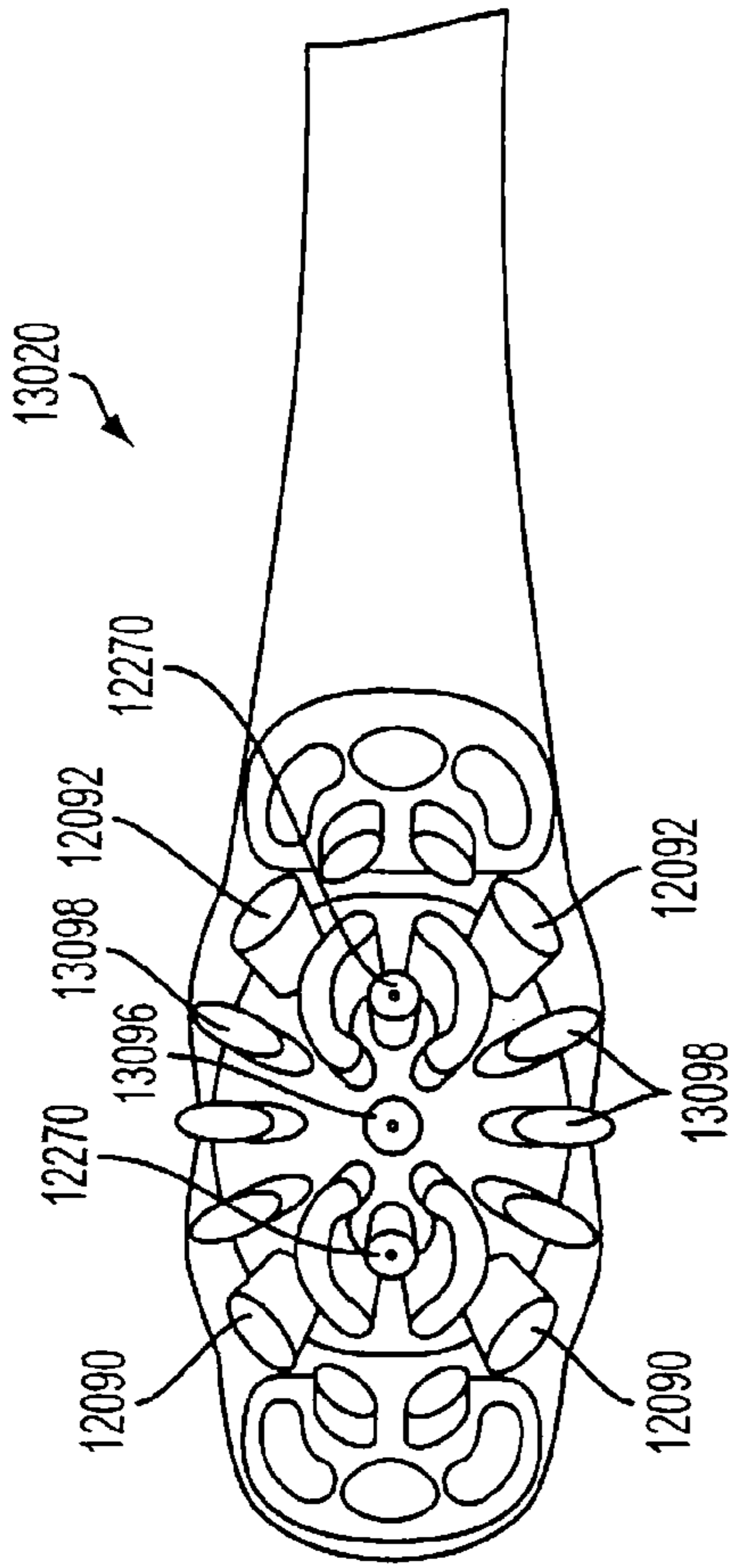


FIG. 23A

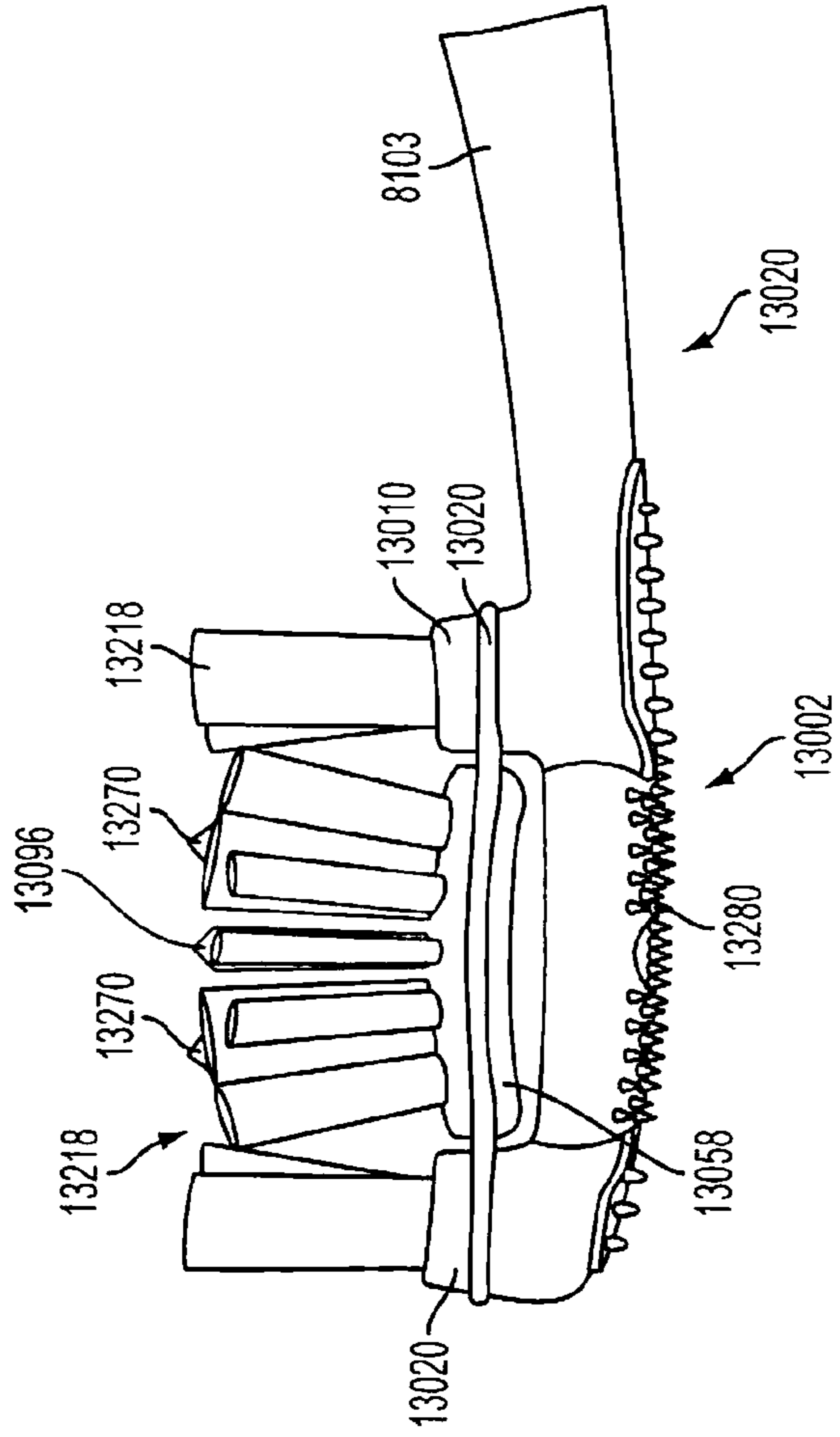


FIG. 23B

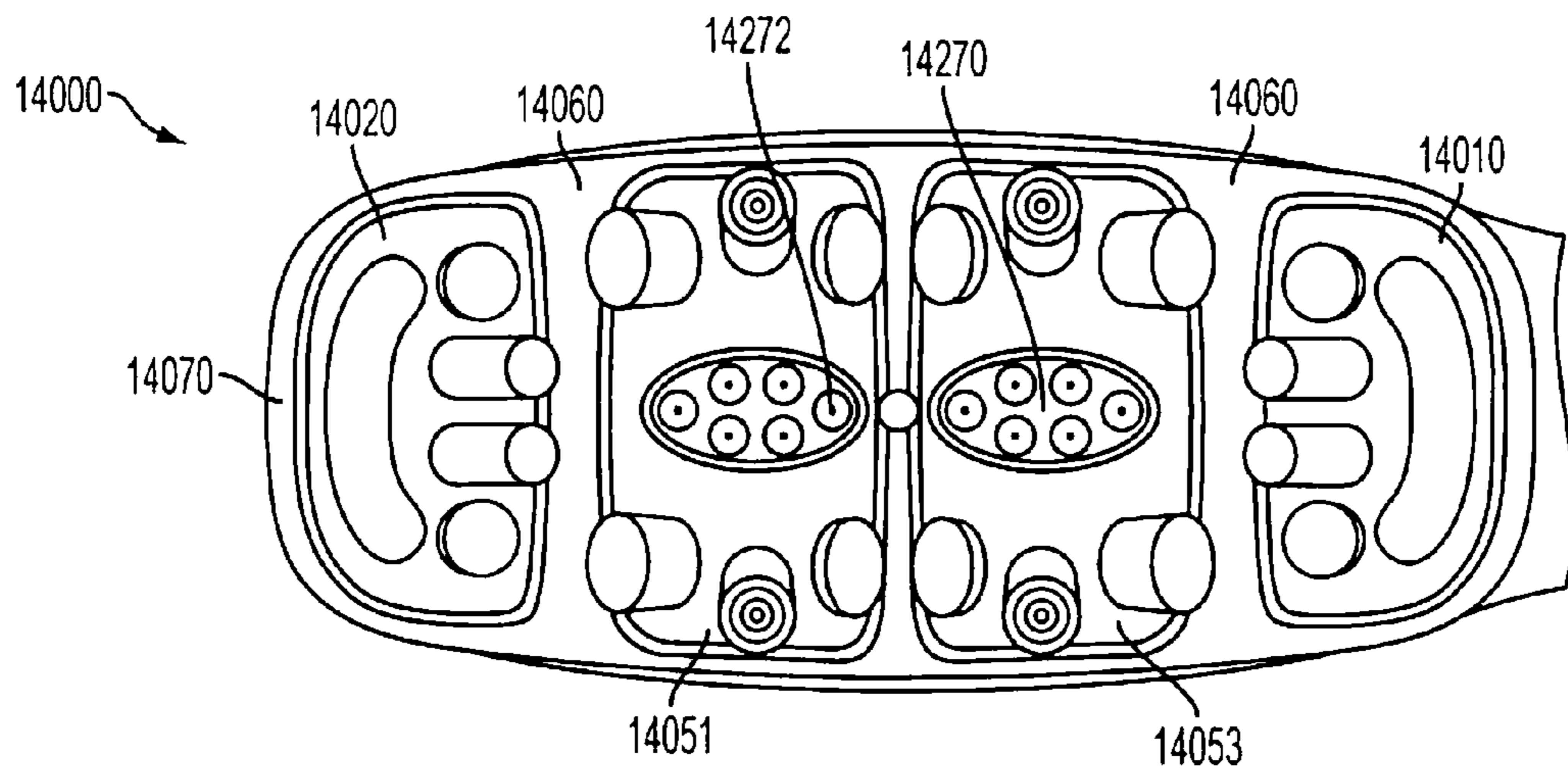


FIG. 24A

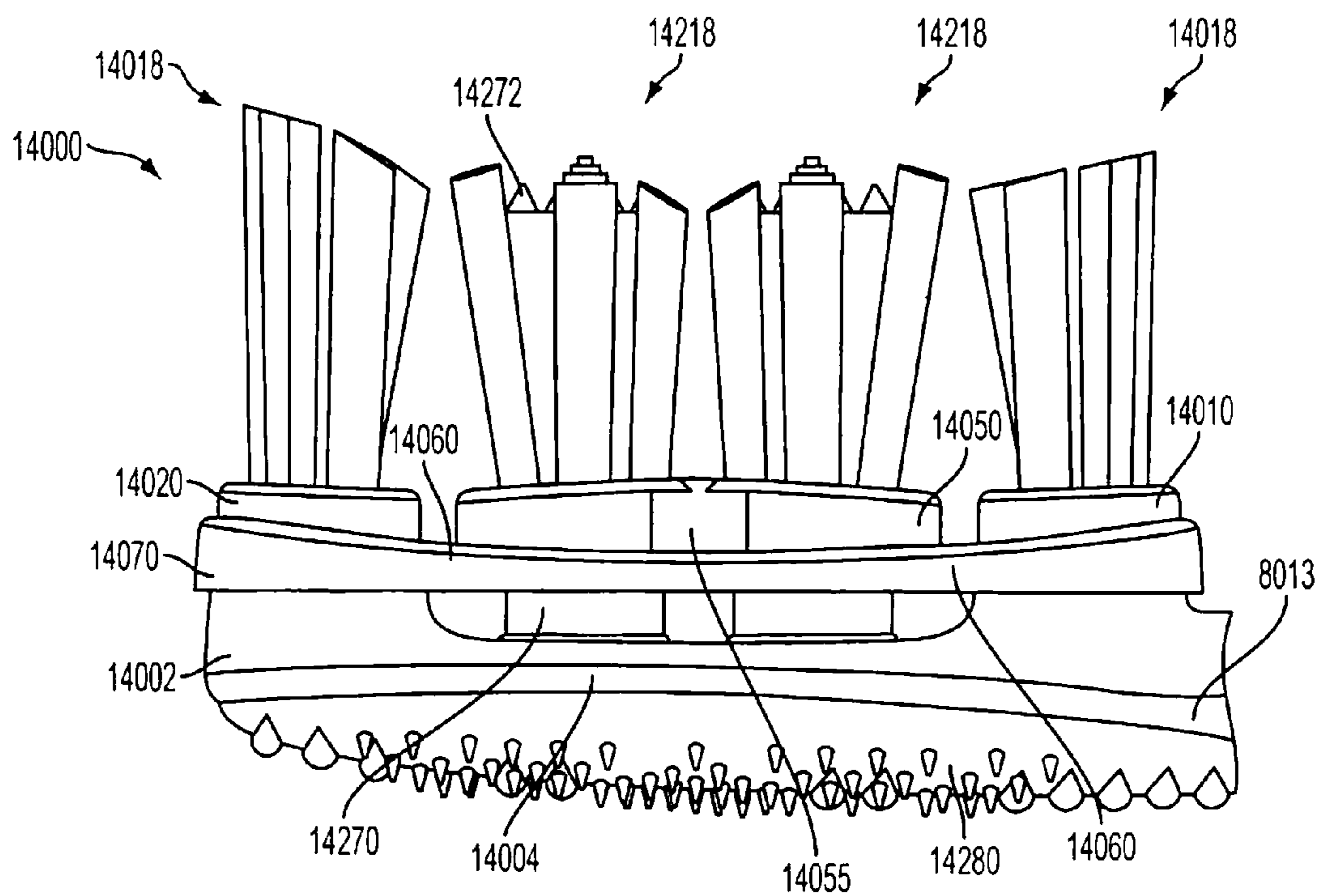


FIG. 24B

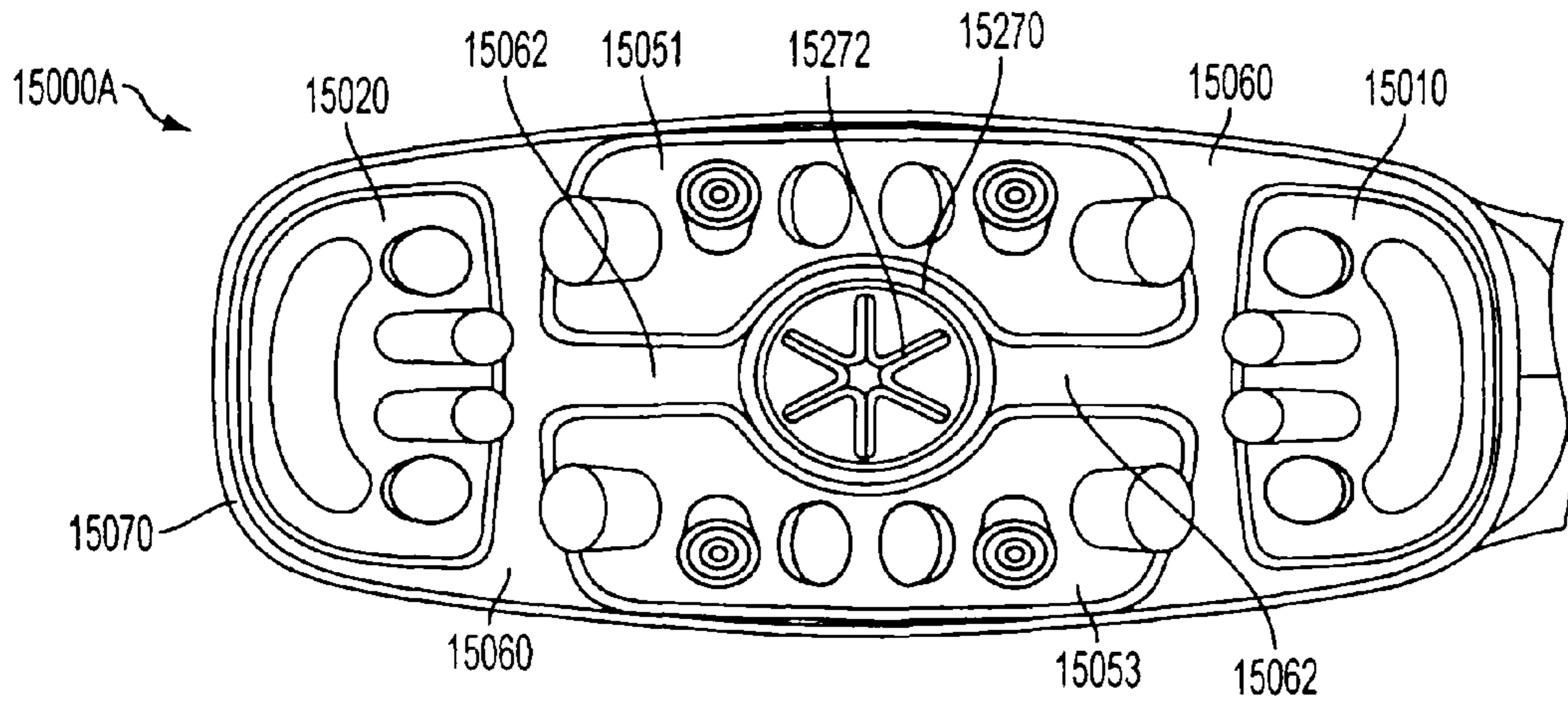


FIG. 25A

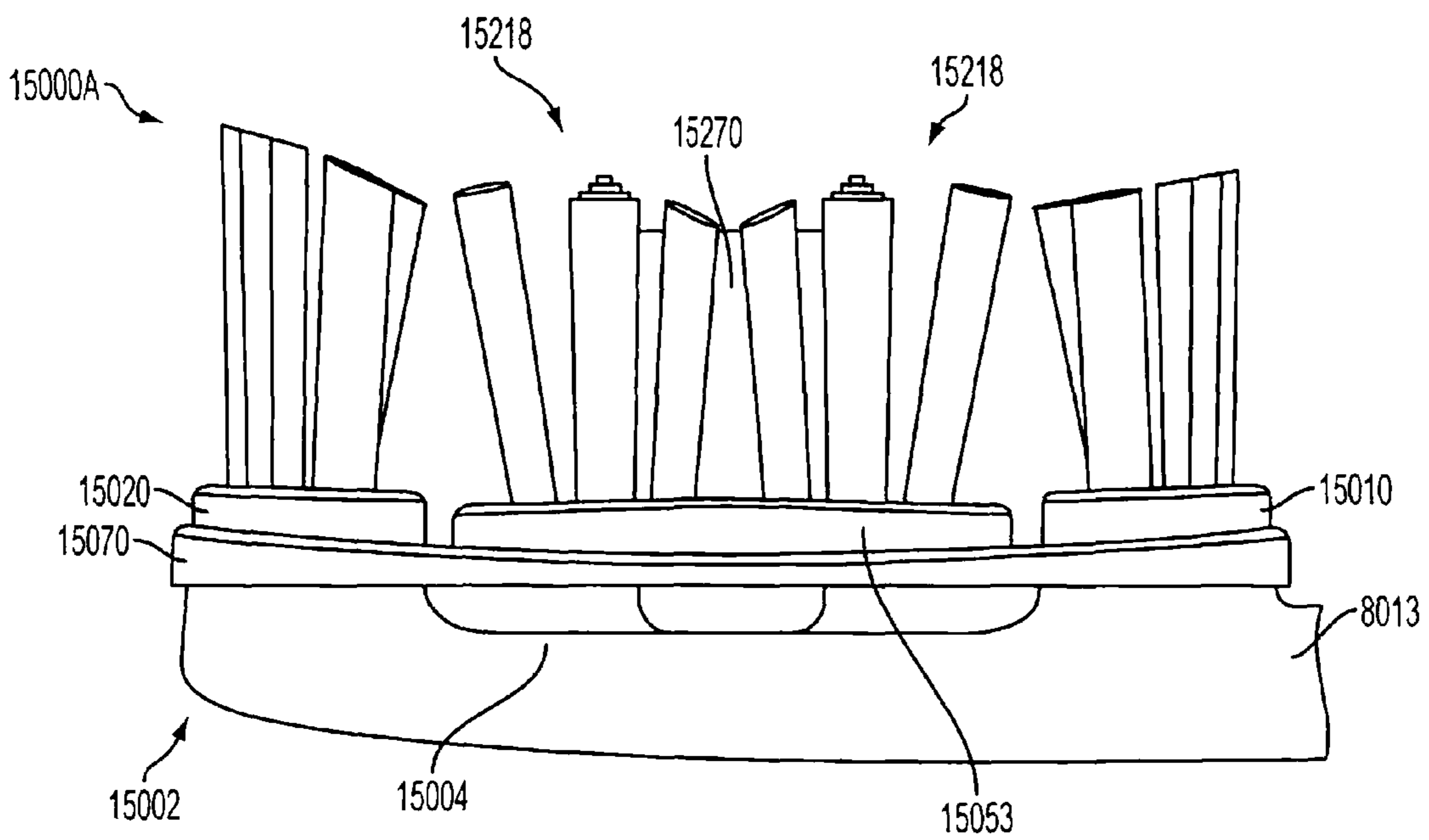


FIG. 25B

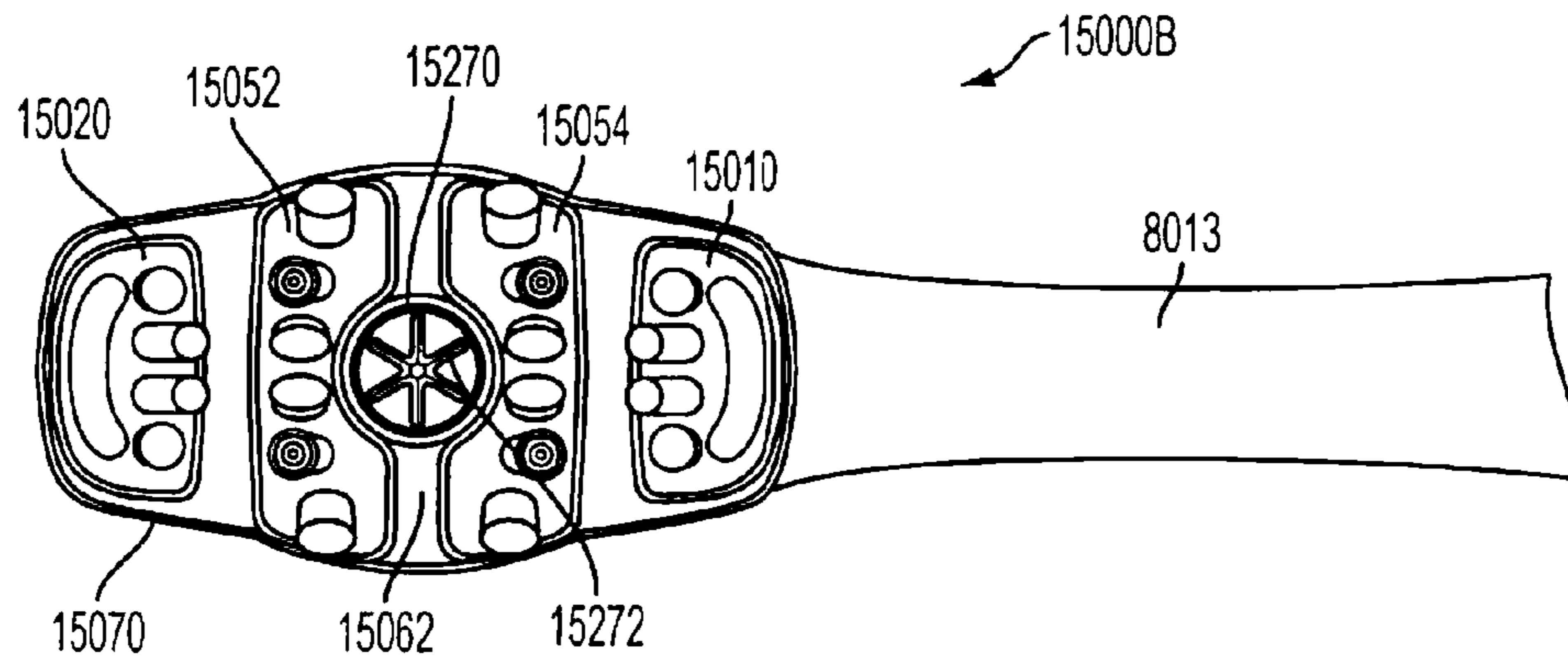


FIG. 25C

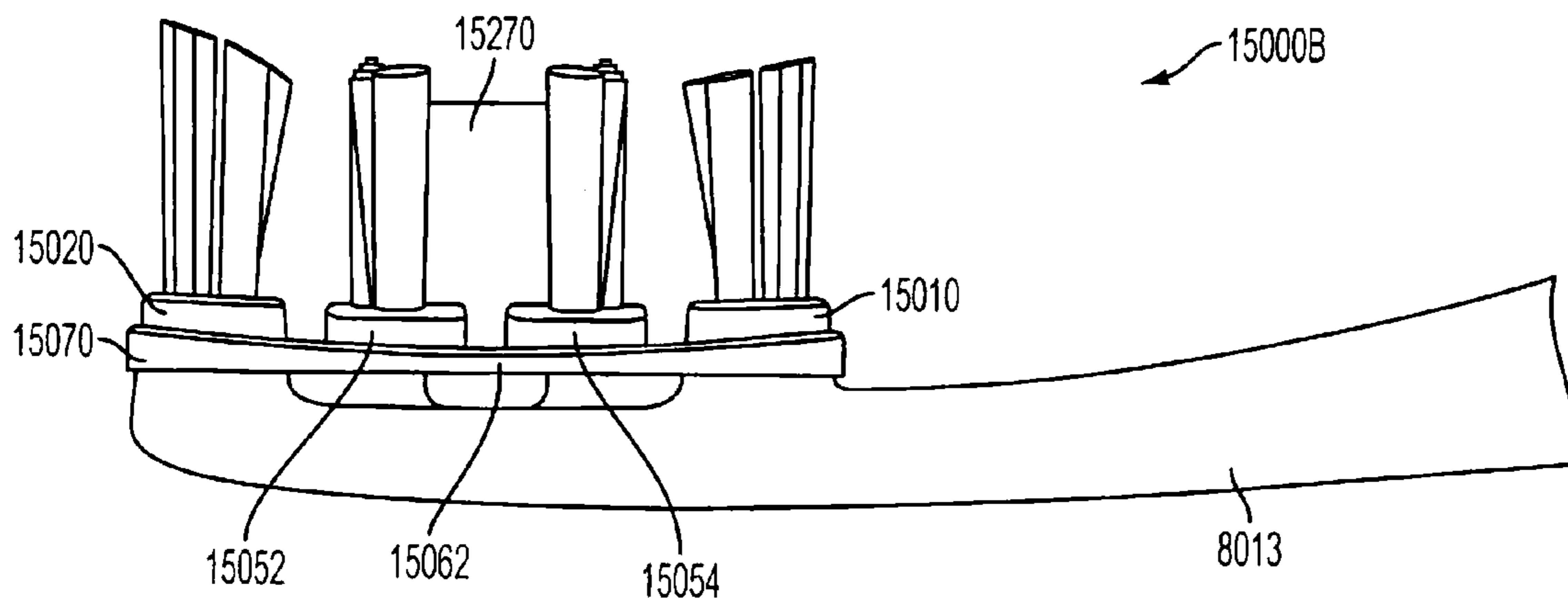


FIG. 25D

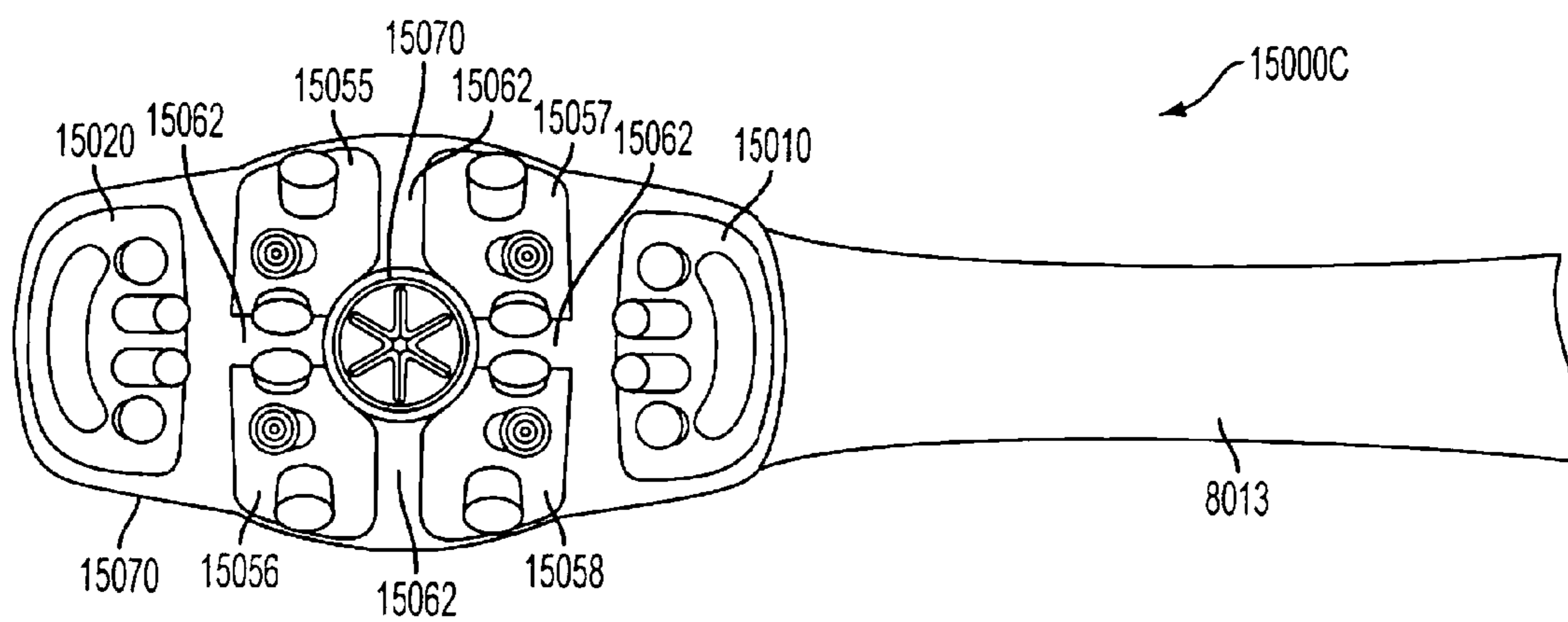


FIG. 25E

ORAL CARE IMPLEMENT**CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATIONS**

This application is a Continuation Application of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/256,790 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,614,111 filed on Oct. 24, 2005, which is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/122,224 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,845,042 filed May 5, 2005, which is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/768,363 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,703,163, filed Jan. 30, 2004, which is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/697,213 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,757,326, filed Oct. 30, 2003.

Further, this is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/019,671 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,721,376, filed Dec. 23, 2004, which: (1) is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/869,922 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,143,462, filed Jun. 18, 2004, which is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/601,106 now abandoned, filed Jun. 20, 2003; (2) is a continuation in part of International Application PCT/US03/030633 filed Sep. 26, 2003, which claims the benefit of U.S. application Ser. No. 60/414,117 filed Sep. 27, 2002, U.S. application Ser. No. 60/418,776, filed Oct. 16, 2002, and U.S. application Ser. No. 60/419,425, filed Oct. 18, 2002; (3) is a continuation in part of International Application PCT/US2003/029497, filed Sep. 17, 2003, which claims the benefit of U.S. application Ser. No. 60/412,290, filed Sep. 20, 2002; (4) is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 29/189,729, filed Sep. 10, 2003; and (5) is a continuation-in-part of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/989,267 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,607,189, filed Nov. 17, 2004, which is a continuation-in-part application of U.S. application Ser. No. 29/209,242, filed Jul. 14, 2004.

Additionally, this application is a continuation in part application of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/989,267 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,607,189, filed Nov. 17, 2004, which is a continuation in part application of U.S. application Ser. No. 29/209,242 now abandoned, filed Jul. 14, 2004, and a continuation in part application of U.S. application Ser. No. 29/209,244 now abandoned, filed Jul. 14, 2004.

Further, this application is a continuation in part application of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/902,257, now U.S. Pat. No. 7,047,591, filed Jul. 30, 2004, which (1) is a continuation in part of International Application PCT/US2003/029497, filed Sep. 17, 2003, which claims priority of U.S. application Ser. No. 60/412,290, filed Sep. 20, 2002; and (2) is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 29/189,729 now U.S. Pat. No. D517812 filed Sep. 10, 2003.

In addition, this application is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/053,583 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,360,270, filed Feb. 8, 2005, which is a continuation of International Application PCT/US2003/024878, filed Aug. 8, 2003, which claims priority to U.S. application Ser. Nos. 60/402,162 filed Aug. 9, 2002, 60/402,170 filed Aug. 9, 2002 and 60/402,670 filed Aug. 12, 2002.

Further, this application is a continuation in part of U.S. application Ser. No. 11/053,589 now U.S. Pat. No. 7,725,981, filed Feb. 8, 2005, which is a continuation of International Application PCT/US2003/024879, filed Aug. 8, 2003, which claims priority to U.S. application Ser. No. 60/402,165 filed Aug. 9, 2002.

The contents of the above-noted applications are each expressly incorporated herein by reference.

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention pertains to an oral care implement having various features that may include a cleaner for clean-

ing soft tissue surfaces in a user's mouth, tooth cleaning or tooth treating elements, movable cleaning features, vibratory mechanisms, and/or handle gripping features.

BACKGROUND

A variety of toothbrush configurations exist that have stationary and/or mechanically-driven movable cleaning elements. These conventional toothbrushes are dedicated to tooth cleaning/polishing operations and typically include a head portion directed to the cleaning/polishing operations, and a handle portion. The head typically has a flat or slightly altered surface to which the cleaning elements are attached, or to which mechanically-driven movable carriers for the cleaning elements are attached.

Tongue scrapers exist as devices for removing micro debris disposed on a user's tongue. Conventional tongue scrapers are stand-alone devices directed to the singular purpose of scraping a user's tongue. These conventional devices typically include a handle and scraper portion without including other cleaning elements.

Users manipulate conventional toothbrushes and tongue scrapers by grasping their handle portions. The handles are typically simple, linear rods of a relatively rigid material, which are neither comfortable for the user nor given to easy manipulation. As these devices are commonly used in wet conditions, their handles are often slippery during use.

Many people use multiple oral care implements, such as toothbrushes and tongue scrapers, on a daily basis to accomplish multiple oral care tasks. For instance, a user may use a toothbrush to clean his teeth and then use a tongue scraper to remove debris from his tongue. The user may then re-use the toothbrush to further clean his tongue. Thus, the user may switch between various oral care implements during a single session in a wet environment.

Conventional toothbrushes have cleaning elements that extend from a rigid head. Teeth and gums by nature have a complex intricate contour. Due to the rigid nature of the attachment of the cleaning elements to the head of the toothbrush, the orientation of the cleaning elements is not flexible and thus conventional toothbrushes do not provide optimal cleaning of teeth and gums. Conventional toothbrushes therefore have great difficulty in contacting areas of the teeth located at a greater distance from the head, including interproximal spaces between teeth.

SUMMARY

The present invention pertains to an oral care implement that provides several advantages and that may be used for multiple functions. In one embodiment of the invention, an oral care implement is provided that has a plurality of cleaning elements extending from the head, which are attached to a support that is flexibly attached to the head. The cleaning elements may include forward angled cleaning elements and/or rearward angled cleaning elements. The cleaning elements may further include a central support at a central portion of the support.

Embodiments of the invention may be multi-functional and include various combinations of features in advantageous combinations. Some embodiments include a soft tissue cleaner in combination with tooth cleaning features and/or in combination with gripping features on the handle that improve the user's grip and handling thereof. The embodiments may be manual or mechanically-driven devices, or combinations thereof.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

A more complete understanding of the present invention and the advantages thereof may be acquired by referring to the following description in consideration of the accompanying drawings, in which like reference numbers indicate like features.

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of an embodiment of an oral care implement such as a toothbrush in accordance with this invention.

FIG. 2 is a side elevational view, in partial section, of the toothbrush shown in FIG. 1.

FIG. 3 is a top, plan view of the toothbrush shown in FIGS. 1 and 2.

FIG. 4 is a side elevational view similar to FIG. 2 shown partially broken away.

FIG. 5 is a side elevational view showing a subassembly of the bristle containing portion of a brush head in accordance with an aspect of the invention.

FIG. 6 is a side elevational view, in partial section, showing the subassembly of FIG. 5 incorporated in a completed toothbrush according to an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 7 is a perspective view of a head portion of an oral care implement in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 8 is a side view of the head portion shown in FIG. 7.

FIG. 9 is a top view of the head portion shown in FIGS. 7 and 8.

FIG. 10 is a side view of a head portion of an oral care implement in accordance with an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 11 is a top view of the head portion shown in FIG. 10.

FIG. 12 is a top view of a soft tissue cleaner side of an oral care implement in accordance with a further embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 13 is a partial perspective view of the oral care implement of FIG. 12 without tooth cleaning elements.

FIG. 14 is a top view of an oral care implement in accordance with a further embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 15 is a partial perspective view of the oral care implement of FIG. 14 without tooth cleaning elements.

FIG. 16 is a partial perspective view of an oral care implement according to a further embodiment of the invention without tooth cleaning elements.

FIG. 17 is a top view of an oral care implement in accordance with a further embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 18 is a partial perspective view of the oral care implement of FIG. 17 without tooth cleaning elements.

FIG. 19 is partial perspective view of an oral care implement according to an embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 20 is a side elevational view of the oral care implement of FIG. 19.

FIG. 21 is a side elevational view of a further embodiment of an oral care implement.

FIG. 22A is a side elevational view of another embodiment of an oral care implement.

FIG. 22B shows the oral care implement of FIG. 22A while engaging a tooth.

FIG. 23A is a top view of an oral care implement according to another embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 23B is a side elevational view of the oral care implement of FIG. 23A.

FIG. 24A is a top view of an oral care implement according to another embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 24B is a side elevational view of the oral care implement of FIG. 24A.

FIG. 25A is a top view of a head of an oral care implement according to another embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 25B is a side elevational view of the oral care implement of FIG. 25A.

FIG. 25C is a top view of a head of an oral care implement according to another embodiment of the invention.

FIG. 25D is a side elevational view of the oral care implement of FIG. 25C.

FIG. 25E is a top view of a head of an oral care implement according to another embodiment of the invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENTS

The following embodiments describe aspects of the invention in the form of various oral care implement configurations that provide a variety of features and functions. Although these aspects are disclosed in the context of particular exemplary embodiments, the invention provides an oral care implement that includes one or more of the features described herein. The oral care implement may include a first feature described in one example configuration herein, as well as a second feature described in another example configuration herein.

In other words, the invention contemplates mixing and matching features from the disclosed embodiments in various combinations into a single oral care implement. The present invention thus makes it possible to select a combination of cleaning element configurations, tissue cleaner configurations, handle features, gripping features, mechanical driving features, materials and orientations, etc. to achieve intended results, and to deliver additional oral health benefits, such as enhanced cleaning, tooth polishing, tooth whitening, tongue cleaning, massaging of gums. etc.

The term "cleaning elements" is intended to be used in a generic sense which could include elements for cleaning, treating, polishing, whitening, scraping, scrubbing, etc. Cleaning elements may include, but are not limited to, nylon or fiber bristles, massage elements, and elastomeric fingers or walls arranged in a circular cross-sectional shape or any type of desired shape including straight portions or sinusoidal portions. In the form of bristles, the cleaning elements may be secured to a flexible membrane or web via in-molded technology, mounting the tuft blocks or sections by extending them through suitable openings in the flexible membrane, or other mechanisms.

A variety of oral care implement configurations are disclosed herein. One configuration is an oral care implement having multiple groupings of cleaning elements that are uniquely mounted to the head of the oral care implement to facilitate flexible orientation of some groupings relative to the teeth and gums being cleaned. For example, groupings of the head may cooperate to "wrap around" individual teeth resulting in deeper penetration of cleaning/treating elements between teeth. Such configurations can provide effective overall cleaning, for example, by independent movement of groups of cleaning elements relative to the head and each other. This configuration and others are described below.

FIGS. 1-4 illustrate a toothbrush 610 in accordance with one embodiment of this invention. As shown therein toothbrush 610 includes an elongated handle 612 with a head 614 connected to and extending from the handle. The head 614 is divided into a plurality of separate cleaning areas which are spaced from each other. As illustrated the cleaning areas include a base 616 located at the distal end of the head 614 and projecting outwardly from the main body portion 930 (FIG. 4) of the head. Base 616 includes at least one and preferably

5

a plurality of cleaning elements **618**. Head **614** further includes a base or supporting member **620** at the proximal end of head **614**. Cleaning elements **618** also extend outwardly from base **620**.

Mounted between the cleaning areas that incorporate bases **616** and **620** are a pair of pods **622**, **624**. Each pod is provided with at least one and preferably a plurality of cleaning elements. As later described the pods **622**, **624** have greater degrees of freedom than do the bases **616**, **620**. In a preferred practice of the invention the pods **622**, **624** are resilient members so that the pod cleaning elements add a motion range beyond the cleaning elements **618** which are generally static or non-movable. Because the various cleaning elements are separated from each other such as by channels **728**, which extend completely across head **614** in a transverse direction, and because of the elastic nature of pods **622**, **624**, the cleaning elements **626** may be capable of 360 degrees rotation about the vertical axis of each individual pod. The angle of the bend may be dictated by the ability of the material to bend.

Toothbrush **610** thus provides a head **614** wherein the front (distal end) and the back (proximal end) areas are in a relatively fixed position and wherein the cleaning/treating elements, such as bristle strands **618** do not have any extra degree of motion. The middle portion of head **614**, however, has two areas of cleaning elements **626**, which are capable of 360 degree rotation.

As shown in FIG. 4, the head **614** includes a main body portion **930** which supports the bases and pods. Body portion **930** and bases **616** and **620** are preferably made from conventional hard plastic materials, such as polypropylene for example, commonly used in the making of toothbrush handles and heads. Pods **622**, **624**, however, are made so as to be resilient. In a preferred practice of this invention, the resiliency of pods **622**, **624** is achieved by providing a thin diameter beam **932** which extends from the main body portion **930** of the head of the toothbrush. Beam **932** is joined into the bottom of a thin pad or plate **934** which provides a support area onto which the cleaning elements **626** are affixed. The manner of mounting the cleaning elements **626** to the support pads **934** can be achieved utilizing various cleaning elements, such as bristles and other cleaning materials, in known attachment methods.

The desired flexibility or resiliency of the pods **622**, **624** is enhanced by enclosing the thin beams **932** in elastic material **936** during a multi-injection molding process. The elastic material **936** is resilient such that the beams **932** to their original form or initial position. This return action creates an active motion in the opposite direction of the beam bend which aids in the cleaning of teeth by introducing extra brushing strokes.

As best shown in FIGS. 1, 2 and 4 the pods **622**, **624** include a widened portion disposed toward the body **930**. The support pads **934** are also widened. Each pod has a narrow or reduced diameter central portion **938** longitudinally intermediate the length of each pod. Thus, each pod is of generally mushroom shape.

Beam **932** could be of any suitable shape such as having a cross-section which is circular, square or any other geometric shape that provides a thin dimension or thin diameter to the beam to facilitate the bendability of the beam. The elastomer **936** may be considered as a continuous layer of any suitable thickness which covers the entire central area of head **614** as illustrated so that both pods **622**, **624** are incorporated as part of the same elastic material. The portion of the head **614** which includes pods **622**, **624** may be formed as a separate subassembly similar to the subassembly later described with respect to FIGS. 5 and 6.

6

Although the invention could be practiced with a single base and a single pod and could be practiced with the base having some, but a lesser degree of flexibility than the pod, the invention is preferably practiced wherein the base is generally static or non-movable. In addition, the invention is preferably practiced where there are a plurality of such bases and a plurality of pods. The drawings illustrate a configuration of the invention where there are a total of four separate cleaning areas with the pods being located in the central portion of head **614**. The invention may be practiced in a configuration in which the cleaning elements comprise a plurality of bristles or strands on each base and each pod.

As illustrated in FIGS. 3 and 4 each base **616** and **620** and each pod **622** and **624** may have a generally oval outer surface. The bases and pods are longitudinally aligned, but spaced from each other by the depressions or open areas which form the channels **728**. As also illustrated in FIG. 3 the pods may have a larger outer surface or cleaning element carrying surface than do the bases.

As shown in FIG. 2 the terminal surfaces of the cleaning elements **618** and **626** are tapered so that the terminal surfaces of the cleaning elements **618** taper outwardly in a direction toward the center of head **614** while the terminal surfaces of cleaning elements **626** taper outwardly in a direction away from the center of head **614**. Thus, the highest points of each set of cleaning elements **618** and its adjacent set of cleaning elements **626** are generally disposed toward each other for each pair of base and pod **616**, **622** and **620**, **624**.

Any suitable form of cleaning elements may be used as the cleaning elements **618** and **626** in the broad practice of this invention. The term "cleaning elements" is intended to be used in a generic sense as described above. Using different cleaning materials as cleaning elements of the toothbrushes may yield different effects. In an attempt to provide better stain removal, a rubber-like material or elastomer can be used in combination with conventional bristles or used by itself to "brighten/whiten" the teeth.

It is to be understood that the specific illustration of the cleaning elements is merely for exemplary purposes. The invention can be practiced with various combinations of the same or different cleaning element configurations (such as stapled, anchor-free tufted (AFT) bristles or in-molded technology (IMT) bristles, etc.) and/or with the same bristle or cleaning elements materials (such as nylon bristles, spiral bristles, rubber bristles, etc.) Similarly, while FIG. 2 illustrates the cleaning elements to be generally perpendicular to the outer surface of head **614**, some or all of the cleaning elements may be angled at various angles with respect to the outer surface of head **614**. It is thereby possible to select the combination of cleaning element configurations, materials and orientations to achieve specific intended results to deliver additional oral health benefits, like enhanced cleaning tooth polishing, tooth whitening and/or massaging of the gums.

FIGS. 5-6 illustrate a further embodiment of this invention. The toothbrush **1110A** has the ability to provide flexible support for the bristles **1026A**, **1126A** in designated areas. The flexibility is provided by designing the tuft holding areas **1034A**, **1134A** as plates, which in combination with the stems **1038A**, **1138A** form pods of mushroom shape. The mushroom stem **1038A**, **1138A** is made flexible to allow the plate **1034A**, **1134A** populated with bristles or cleaning elements **1026A**, **1126A** to move in different directions while brushing, as described with respect to the flexible pods of FIGS. 1-4.

FIGS. 5-6 show the toothbrush **1110A** and in particular the cleaning element or bristle carrying portion **1023**, **1123** of the head **1114A**. As shown in FIG. 5, the bristle or cleaning element carrying portion **1023** forms an initial subassembly.

This subassembly is made by introducing the cleaning elements **1026A** into the mold cavity into which a plastic material is injected. As the material injected cools off it permanently traps the bristles or cleaning elements **1026A** to form a brush or subassembly **1023**.

To achieve a functional flexibility and proper tuft retention the portion of the bristle holding part or subassembly **1023** which comprises the plates **1034A**, stems **1038A** and interconnecting support **1025** is preferably a blend of polypropylene (PP) and soft TPE. Once the PP/TPE blend is combined with the bristles **1026A** the subassembly **1023** is formed. The subassembly **1023** is then overmolded with an entire toothbrush handle **1112A** and head **1114A** during a second injection cycle to form the completed toothbrush **1110A** shown in FIG. 6. If desired or required the entire handle **1112A** and head **1114A** absent the subassembly **1123** could be made first and the subassembly or bristle retaining portion **1123** made second. While an IMT process has been described, the subassembly could also be formed using an AFT process, wherein the cleaning elements are fused together and then captured within the plates, for example.

It is to be understood that the invention described in FIGS. 5-6 could be practiced where all portions of the head **1114A** include the flexible mushroom sections without having less flexible base portions such as bases **616** and **620** of FIGS. 1-4. Similarly, the subassembly two shot techniques of FIGS. 5-6 could be utilized in the embodiment of FIGS. 1-4 for forming the two or more central pods as a single subassembly initially made separate from the remainder of the head **1114A**. The final toothbrush would be made in a second injection molding process wherein the subassembly having interconnected pods **622**, **624** would be molded to the handle **612** and head **614** made of more rigid material.

As noted, FIG. 2 illustrates the terminal surfaces of the cleaning elements **618** and **626** to be tapered in an up and down or zigzag manner. FIGS. 5-6 show an alternative taper wherein the terminal surfaces form a smooth, gentle, concave shape. If desired, other shapes may be used such as a planar shape for the terminal surfaces or a convex shape as well as the zigzag or up and down shape shown in FIG. 2. Similarly, the terminal ends of the cleaning elements in the FIGS. 1-4 embodiment, as well as those of FIGS. 5-6, could have the various shapes such as zigzag, convex, concave or planar.

FIGS. 7-25E show additional embodiments of the invention that further illustrate the combinability of various aspects, features and functions disclosed herein into single oral care implement configurations. FIGS. 7-25E disclose oral care implement configurations that provide a tooth cleaner having separate groups of cleaning elements, which may each be mounted on a fixed base or a flexible pod, and which may provide a soft tissue cleaner in addition to the tooth cleaner. The configurations may be powered or manual devices, and the handles may include gripping features. As such, the oral care implements disclosed in FIGS. 7-25E generally include the aspects discussed along with FIGS. 1-6 pertaining to groups of cleaning elements that may include flexible pods. It is understood that other features may be used along with these configurations, such as mechanical drive features discussed in co-pending application Ser. Nos. 11/122,224 and 10/768,363 (i.e., the heads of the various embodiments described herein could be vibrating heads) and tooth cleaning features discussed throughout the specification.

FIGS. 7-9 illustrate an oral care implement **9910**, such as a toothbrush, in accordance with another embodiment of the invention. As shown therein, toothbrush **9910** includes a head **9914** and a handle **8103**. Handle **8103** may be formed in

accordance with the teachings of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/902,257, filed Jul. 30, 2004, incorporated by reference herein, although other handle configurations may be used, such as handle **612**, **1112A** shown in FIGS. 1-6. Head **9914** is generally the same as head **614** discussed along with FIGS. 1-6, with the exception of cleaning elements **9918** and the contoured surface **9940** disposed on an opposite side of the head from the cleaning elements. Thus, head **9914** generally includes bases **616** and **620** that respectively support cleaning elements **9942** and **9944** in a substantially static configuration. Head **9914** also includes pods **622** and **624** disposed between the bases for respectively supporting cleaning elements **9946** and **9948**. As discussed along with FIGS. 1-6, pods **622** and **624** can provide flexible mounts for cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** attached thereto, and may permit rotation and/or oscillation of the cleaning elements **9946** and **9948**.

FIG. 7 shows a contoured surface **9940** disposed on an opposite side of the head from the cleaning elements. Contoured surface **9940** includes hills **9950** and valleys **9952** to provide a rolling or undulating surface on a rear face of the head. Surface **9940** may be relatively smooth for use with massaging oral tissues and, as illustrated in FIGS. 10 and 12-18, the surface may include soft tissue cleaning elements for engaging soft oral tissues and provide cleaning benefits thereto.

FIG. 9 is top view of head **9914**, which shows a configuration of tooth cleaning elements **9918** for use with head **9914**. Cleaning elements **9918** may be formed of elastomeric wall members, elongate bristle tufts, or other types of cleaning elements, which are independently flexible. In this way, the cleaning elements are able to provide a limited and controlled flow of the dentifrice, as well as maintain sufficient flexibility to provide improved cleaning of a user's teeth and stimulation of the user's gums via the cleaning elements.

Cleaning elements **9918** are oriented for engaging surfaces to be cleaned in a generally-intended application direction A (see FIG. 8), which is generally perpendicular to the face of head **9914**. Cleaning elements **9918**, however, include a mixture of cleaning elements that are aligned with (non-angled) and oblique to direction A (angled). The arrangement of angled and non-angled cleaning elements provides effective engagement and cleaning of oral surfaces, which is further enhanced by the movable pods configuration. The cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** mounted on pods **622** and **624** are adapted to engage a user's teeth, gums and other surfaces in a various ways that take advantage of their flexible support configuration. As such, cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** include forward elements **9950** angled toward the tip end of the head, and rearward elements **9952** angled toward the handle. As shown, the forward and rearward elements **9950**, **9952** are preferably placed on the forward and rearward sides of their respective pods, and more preferably, are placed in the corner regions of the pods. Such a location and orientation increases the likelihood that elements **9950** and **9952** will initially engage a surface to be cleaned prior to other cleaning elements on the respective pod, which encourages the respective pod to flex as the remaining cleaning elements thereon are engaging the surface.

For instance, as oral care implement **9910** is moved forward such that head **9914** leads the toothbrush, forward elements **9950** will initially engage surfaces to be cleaned prior to rearward elements **9952** or other cleaning elements disposed between elements **9950** and **9952**. The forward angle of elements **9950** will encourage pods **622** and **624** to bend rearward when the forward elements contact a surface to be cleaned while the toothbrush is moving forward. The rear-

ward bending of the pods, and their action of springing forward in response to the bending, enhances the cleaning effectiveness of the cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** disposed on the pods. The angled configuration of elements **9950** and **9952** improves the bending of the pods in comparison with alternate embodiments wherein the cleaning elements are disposed perpendicular to the toothbrush face **9954** and are angled neither forward nor rearward.

Cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** of the pods also include non-angled cleaning elements **9954**, which are beneficial for penetrating surfaces to be cleaned. In addition, cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** include a pair of bent, upstanding walls **9956** in a central portion of the pods. Such walls could be formed as a densely packed bristle tuft by an IMT or AFT process, or such walls could include elastomeric elements. Other configurations are contemplated. Each one of the walls in the pair **9956** has a concave side opposing the concave side of the other wall in the pair. The bent configuration and opposed convex sides of upstanding walls **9956** improve retention of dentifrice therebetween during use of the oral care implement. In addition, the bent configuration provides a pair of rigid walls, which, in their central location of the pod, supports the pod to prevent overflexing of the cleaning elements **9946**, **9948**.

Cleaning elements **9942** and **9944** disposed on static bases **616** and **620** are configured to cooperate with cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** on the movable pods, as well as to effectively clean oral surfaces. The bases each include a bristle **9960**, a series of upstanding walls **9962**, and angled cleaning elements **9964**, **9966**. Bristle **9960** is generally a non-angled column that effectively penetrates gaps and recesses between oral structures (e.g., teeth).

The series of upstanding walls **9962** are arranged to generally form a concave wall directed toward the remaining cleaning elements **9918**. Thus, the concave wall **9962** of the front base **616** has its concave side directed rearward toward the handle, and the concave wall on the rear base **620** has its concave side directed forward toward the remainder of bristles **9918**. In such a configuration, the opposing concave walls work in concert to retain dentifrice within the field of bristles **9918** via their concave shape that cups the dentifrice, as well as via small gaps between the upstanding walls that form the concave walls, which reduce the flow of dentifrice therebetween. In addition, the upstanding walls forming the concave walls are non-angled cleaning elements that provide support to the head **9914** during use and resist overflexing of the cleaning elements when excessive downward force is applied by the user.

Angled cleaning elements **9962** and **9964** are angled toward the movable pods **622** and **624** to cooperate with cleaning elements **9946** and **9948** attached thereto for effectively cleaning oral surfaces. As such, rear base **620** includes forward angled elements **9964**, and front base **616** includes rearward angled elements **9966**. Angled cleaning elements **9962** and **9964** are disposed close to one another inward of a respective pair of angled cleaning elements **9950** and **9952** of the movable pods. Thus, as the pods flex back and forth, angled cleaning elements **9962** and **9964** interpose between corresponding angled cleaning elements **9964** and **9966**. This provides a scissor-like action that enhances cleaning effectiveness and avoids interference between opposing cleaning elements **9964**, **9966** and **9962**, **9964** that may limit movement of the pods.

The cleaning elements described in connection with the embodiment of FIGS. 7-9, as well as the embodiments to follow, are preferably formed using an AFT technique as is known in the art. This technique facilitates the arrangement of

cleaning element constructions that depart from the traditional stapled perpendicular tuft. With AFT technology, the anchored ends of the cleaning elements are melted together to form a block of cleaning elements, that can then be arranged on a head plate with various dimensions, angles and orientations. Thus, the blocks of cleaning elements are generally captured within the pod structures, not embedded in a supporting medium.

Referring now to FIGS. 10-13, an oral care implement **10210** is shown in accordance with a further embodiment of the invention. As shown therein, oral care implement **10210** includes a handle **8103**, a head **10214** having cleaning elements **10218** attached thereto on a first side of the head, and a soft tissue cleaner **10280** disposed on a second side of the head that is opposite to the first side. Oral care implement **10210** generally includes the aspects and features of oral care implement **9910**, except as pertaining to the configuration of cleaning elements and the soft tissue cleaning features. Cleaning elements **10218** primarily include upstanding walls, which may include an elastomeric element, or may be formed as a densely packed bristle tuft by an IMT or AFT process. Other configurations are contemplated. The upstanding walls provide beneficial wiping and polishing of teeth, in addition to cleaning benefits. Cleaning elements **10218** also include a central columnar cleaning element **10270**, which may be a bristle, for penetrating oral surfaces. As shown in FIG. 10, each central cleaning element **10270** extends beyond other cleaning elements proximate thereto on the same pod. In addition, central cleaning element has a pointed tip. As such, central cleaning element **10270** effectively penetrates and engages oral surfaces and gaps between surfaces.

Similar to the configuration of FIGS. 4 and 7, and as shown in FIG. 11, the tips or terminal ends of cleaning elements **10218** are tapered such that the pods are respectively encouraged toward their adjacent static base while engaging surfaces to be cleaned. Thus, during use, cleaning elements **9948** are generally biased toward engagement with cleaning elements **9944** on rear base **620**, and cleaning elements **9946** are generally biased toward engagement with cleaning elements **9942** on front base **616**. This bias can work along with movement of the pods that is imparted via engagement of angled cleaning elements with cleaning surfaces when the device is being moved. Increasing movement and the flexing of bases **622** and **624** further enhances the cleaning effectiveness of the oral care implement.

The soft tissue cleaner **10280** includes a plurality of projections **10281** extending from a face **10284** on a second side of head **10214**, which is generally opposite from the direction in which tooth cleaning elements **10218** extend. Soft tissue cleaner **10280** is disposed on a contoured surface, such as contoured surface **9940** shown in FIG. 7, which includes hills **9950** and valleys **9952** to provide a rolling or undulating surface on a second face of the head. Projections **10281** may be separately molded and glued to the contoured surface or otherwise attached thereto. In addition, they may be integrally formed with the head **10214**. The projections could each be made from a material different from other projections and/or different from other parts. Soft materials, such as a TPE or the like, can be fixed to head **10214** to form the projections. However, a harder material or virtually any known material used to make oral care implements may be appropriate for the projections.

Projections **10281** include a plurality of nubs **10282**, which extend from contoured surface **9940** to engage the soft tissue in a user's mouth. The projections **10281** could have a variety

11

of shapes, patterns, cross-sections, configurations, etc., and the soft tissue cleaner could have a variety of configurations for the projections.

As shown in FIG. 13, nubs 10282 generally cover rear face 10284 in a cleaner field 10288, which extends from a region 5 opposite the rear base 620 at a lower portion of the head to a region opposite the front base 616 at a tip portion of the head. The nubs are dispersed in a substantially continuous pattern over the cleaner field. The cleaner field includes hills 10290 proximate edge portions of face 10284, and valleys 10292 10 disposed between the hills and at a central portion of the face. The configuration of hills and valleys enhances the effectiveness of the soft tissue cleaner by concentrating the applied force at the hill portions during initial contact with a user's soft tissue, which can increase penetration into the soft tissue 15 versus a relatively flat configuration. As the user applies additional force, the valleys contact the soft tissue to aid in cleaning the soft tissues. If excessive force is applied, the valleys help to limit excessive penetration. When the nubs in the valley regions engage the soft tissue, they provide the added benefit of dislodging debris that is loosened by the deeper penetration of nubs on the hills. Thus, projections on the hills and valleys work in concert to initially loosen and then dislodge debris in a user's soft tissue.

FIGS. 14 and 15 illustrate another embodiment 10610 of an 25 oral care implement according to the invention. Oral care implement 10610 generally includes the same aspects and features of oral care implement 10210, except with respect to the configuration of projections on the soft tissue cleaner 10680. Rather than having nubs across the cleaner field, soft tissue cleaner 10680 only includes nubs 10282 on the hills 10288. Instead, multiple ridges 10294 are disposed in some of the valley regions 10290 including a central portion of face 10284. The ridges can be made from the same or a different 30 material than the nubs. For instance, the nubs and ridges may be made of the same type of elastomer; however, the elastomer for the ridges may be more rigid than that for the nubs.

Ridges 10294 have variable lengths that provide variable levels of soft tissue engagement during use. As such, longer and shorter ridges can work in concert to loosen and dislodge 40 debris as the different lengths of ridges successively engage portions of soft tissue. Ridges 10294 taper from a wide base region disposed proximate the face 10284, to a narrower tip 10696. Thus, increasing levels of soft tissue engagement are provided depending on the amount of user force applied.

FIG. 16 illustrates another embodiment 10810 of an oral care implement according to the invention. Oral care implement 10810 generally includes the same aspect and features of oral care implement 10610, except with respect to the configuration of projections on the soft tissue cleaner 10880. 50 Soft tissue cleaner 10880 differs from soft tissue cleaner 10680 in that it does not include ridges 10294. Thus, soft tissue cleaner includes nubs 10282 that are only located on hills 10288 along the side portions of face 10284. As such, gentle cleaning is provided via the nubs located on the hills. The gentle cleaning is beneficial for simultaneous functionality of the oral care implement, such as when a user cleans his teeth while simultaneously engaging soft tissues inside his cheek via soft tissue cleaner 10880. The gentle engagement can provide pleasant sensory stimulation along with gentle 60 cleaning of the soft tissues.

FIGS. 17 and 18 illustrate another embodiment 10910 of an oral care implement according to the invention. Oral care implement 10910 generally includes the same aspects and features of oral care implement 10610, except with respect to 65 the configuration of projections on the soft tissue cleaner 10980. Soft tissue cleaner 10980 differs from soft tissue

12

cleaner 10680 in that ridges 10994 are not provided in the central portion of face 10284, but are provided in valleys 10290 disposed between adjacent pairs of hills 10288. In addition, ridges 10994 are generally smaller than ridges 10294. As such, gentle cleaning is provided, which, similar to oral care implement 10810, can be beneficial during simultaneous functionality of the device.

Referring now to FIGS. 19-20 an oral care implement 12000 is shown in accordance with a further embodiment of the invention. As shown therein, oral care implement 12000 includes a handle 8103, a head 12002 having a frame 12004, bases or pods 12010, 12020, 12032 and 12034 on a front side of the head, cleaning elements 12218 extending from the pods, and a soft tissue cleaner 12280 disposed on a rear side of the head that is opposite to the front side. Oral care implement 12000 generally includes the aspects and features of oral care implement 10210 shown in FIGS. 10-13, except as discussed hereafter. The soft tissue cleaner 12280 is generally the same as soft tissue cleaner 10280. However, various soft tissue cleaner configurations may be used, such as, for example, the soft tissue cleaners of FIGS. 14-18.

Oral care implement 12000 shown in FIGS. 19 and 20 is illustrated as having four pods: a proximal pod 12010, a distal pod 12020 and two central pods 12032 and 12034. The proximal and distal pods extend from frame 12004, which is on a rear portion of the head. The embodiment shown in FIGS. 19 and 20 differs from the embodiments shown in FIGS. 1-18 in that the central pods 12032 and 12034 are not connected 30 directly to the rear, frame portion of head 12002, but rather are suspended between the proximal pod 12010 and the distal pod 12020. The proximal pod and the distal pod are attached to the frame, whereas the central pods are suspended over the frame. As such, the central pods are spaced from the frame such that a gap 12050 is disposed therebetween.

Central pods 12032 and 12034 are suspended via bridge supports 12060, which may include a pair of substantially parallel supports 12067 separated by a gap 12065. A first bridge support extends longitudinally between the proximal pod 12010 and central pod 12034, and a second pair of bridge supports extends longitudinally between distal pod 12020 and central pod 12034. In addition, a bridge support extends longitudinally between central pods 12032 and 12034. Thus each central pod is supported by a pair of opposite bridge 45 supports.

While the illustrated embodiment shows pairs of supports 12067 on each side of each central pod, other configurations are contemplated. For example, instead of a pair of supports 12067, a single bridge element may be disposed between the proximal or distal pod and the adjacent central pod, and between the two central pods. Such a single bridge could be wider than each of the individual pair of supports 12067 such that the width of the single bridge support generally equals the width of the pair of supports plus gap 12065 therebetween.

The central pods 12032 and 12034 generally have greater degrees of freedom than do the proximal and distal pods. In one configuration, bridge supports 12060 and 12070 are substantially rigid. Even so, the suspension arrangement can provide a moderate amount of flexibility to the central pods. In a preferred, more flexible configuration, bridge supports 12060 and 12070 are flexible features that permit the cleaning elements extending from the central pods 12032 and 12034 to have a much larger range of motion than the cleaning elements extending from the proximal and distal pods 12010 and 12020, respectively, which are generally static or non-movable. The flexible bridge supports may be formed from a resilient material, such as a thermoplastic elastomer. Other

13

rubber-like materials may be used, such as other thermoplastics, or a thermoplastic urethane, or a plastomer, or any combination thereof.

In a flexible configuration, bridge supports **12060** and **12070** are resilient and allow the central pods to twist about their support axis and/or move toward frame **12004** when downward force is applied to the central pods during use of the implement. Further, the elastic nature of the bridge supports may permit the central pods to return to their original form or initial position when the force is decreased. In addition, when the oral care implement is moved in a longitudinal direction parallel to the handle **8103**, the central pods can deflect longitudinally as they engage a surface to be cleaned. The deflection of the central pods in the longitudinal direction may also be due to the elastic nature of the support bridges **12060** and **12070**. Such return action can create an active motion in the opposite direction of the direction of movement, which aids in the cleaning of teeth by introducing extra brushing strokes.

The distance between the proximal pod **12010** and the distal pod **12020** may be greater than the width of each of the central pods **12032** and **12034**, and in the illustrated embodiment of FIG. **19** is approximately twice the width of one of the central pods. Further, in the illustrated embodiment, the central pods **12032** and **12034** are suspended away from the frame a distance slightly less than the thickness of the central pods **12032** and **12034**. The length of the support bridges **12060** and **12070** may be significantly less than the length of the central pods **12032** and **12034**, and, in the configuration shown in FIGS. **19** and **20**, is approximately $\frac{1}{5}$ the length of the central pods. As a result, with two central pods of the configuration shown in FIGS. **19** and **20**, the support bridges **12060** and **12070** span less than 25% of the total distance between the proximal and distal pods **12010** and **12020**, respectively.

In addition, the configuration shown in FIGS. **19** and **20** includes a unitary assembly **12500** (reference number not shown) that forms a top portion of proximal pod **12010**, the top of distal pod **12020**, bridge supports **12060** and **12070** and central pods **12032** and **12034**. The unitary assembly **12500** may be made from an elastomeric material, such as a soft thermoplastic elastomer (TPE). Again, other rubber-like materials may be used, such as other thermoplastics, or a thermoplastic urethane, or a plastomer, or any combination thereof. The top portions **12033** and **12035** of the proximal and distal pods can be attached to protrusions (not shown) extending from the underlying head **12002**, thereby providing sufficient support and strength to the proximal and distal pods **12032** and **12034**. The top portions may also be formed as unitary features along with the frame of the head, such as from a unitary plastic mold. When formed as differentiated features, the proximal and distal pods could be formed from the same or different materials than the frame, the bridge supports and/or the central pods. For instance, the bridge supports and central pods could be made from a first thermoplastic material, and the proximal and distal pods could be formed separately from a second thermoplastic material, such as polypropylene. In such a configuration, the bridge supports and the central pods could be made as a unitary construction that is welded or adhered to the proximal and distal pods. Further, the bridge supports, the central pods, and the top portions of the proximal and distal pods could be formed as a unitary member that is attached to the frame.

As discussed with regard to the embodiment shown in FIGS. **7** and **8**, the cleaning elements **12218** mounted on the central pods can be adapted to engage a user's teeth, gums and other surfaces in a various ways that take advantage of their

14

flexible support configuration. For instance, as shown in FIG. **19**, the cleaning elements provided on the central pods can include forward elements **12090** angled toward the lip end of the head, and rearward elements **12092** angled toward the handle end. The location and orientation of these forward and rearward elements can increase the likelihood such elements will initially engage a surface to be cleaned prior to other cleaning elements on the respective pod, thereby encouraging the respective pod to flex as the remaining cleaning elements thereon engage the surface.

As further shown in FIG. **19**, cleaning elements **12218** may include upstanding walls **12094**, which may be elastomeric or bristle-based as discussed above. The upstanding walls can provide beneficial wiping and polishing of teeth in addition to cleaning benefits. Cleaning elements **12218** may further include a central columnar cleaning element **12270**, which may include one or more bristles for penetrating oral surfaces. The columnar cleaning elements may extend beyond other cleaning elements proximate thereto on the same pod, and they may have a generally pointed tip. As such, central cleaning element **12270** can effectively penetrate and engage oral surfaces and gaps between surfaces.

The tips or terminal ends of cleaning elements **12218** may be tapered such that the suspended pods are respectively encouraged toward their adjacent proximal or distal pod **12020** and **12010**, respectively, while engaging surfaces to be cleaned. Thus, during use, cleaning elements extending from central pod **12032** may generally be biased toward engagement with cleaning elements extending from proximal pod **12010**, whereas cleaning elements extending from central pod **12034** may generally be biased toward engagement with cleaning elements extending from distal pod **12020**. This bias can cooperate with movement of the pods imparted via engagement of angled cleaning elements with cleaning surfaces when the device is being moved. Increasing movement and the flexing of the suspended central pods **12032** and **12034** further enhances the cleaning effectiveness of the oral care implement.

Referring now to FIG. **21**, a toothbrush **13000** is shown that is similar to the embodiment illustrated in FIGS. **19** and **20** and generally has the same the aspects and features, except as pertaining to its central pod and the configuration of cleaning elements **13218** and its lack of a soft tissue cleaner. Toothbrush **13000** includes a handle **8103** and a head **13002** having a combination of fixed and suspended cleaning elements. Head **13002** includes a frame **13004**, proximal and distal pods **13010** and **13020**, and a single central pod **13050** suspended between the proximal and distal pods. The handle **8103**, head **13002** and proximal and distal pods **13010** and **13020** may be formed as a unitary construction from a thermoplastic, such as polypropylene.

Single central pod **13050** has an elastomeric section **13055** disposed in a middle portion of the central pod. The elastomeric section is preferably made from a resilient material, such as a soft thermoplastic elastomer (TPE), while the central pod is preferably made from more rigid material, such as polypropylene. The central pod **13050** is held in place by a molded TPE membrane **13070** that connects with the proximal and distal pods **13010** and **13020** to form bridge supports **13060**. The membrane **13070** may form a loop that encompasses the pair of fixed proximal and distal pods **13010** and **13020** and attaches to opposing sides of central pod **13050**. Grooves (not shown) in side portions of the proximal and distal pods, as well as the central pod, may receive membrane **13070**. In addition, membrane **13070** may be attached to the pods via an adhesive and/or a melt bond.

15

Membrane **13070** allows the central pod **13050** to move toward frame **13004** when sufficient force is applied during a cleaning operation. When such force is applied to the central pod, opposite halves **13051** and **13053** of the central pod will also flex about the elastomeric section **13055**. As a result, the two sets of cleaning elements **13218** extending from either end of the central pod **13050** can rotate toward one another. The central pod **13050** can flex back to its original position when the force on the central pod moving it toward the head **13002** diminishes.

Cleaning elements **13218** extending from central pod **13050** are generally centrally-tapered, which is generally an opposite orientation to the configuration of cleaning elements shown in FIGS. **10** and **11** and FIGS. **19** and **20**. The central taper encourages cleaning elements **13218** to penetrate interproximal spaces of the user's teeth while applying moderate force to toothbrush **13000** against their teeth. When the user applies more excessive force to the toothbrush, central pod **13050** moves into contact with frame **13004** and causes the central pod to bend about elastomeric section **13055** and further engage the interproximal space to which the cleaning elements are applied.

Referring now to FIGS. **22A** and **22B**, a toothbrush **13010** is shown that is similar to the embodiment illustrated in FIG. **21** and generally has the same the aspects and features as toothbrush **13000**, except as pertaining to its frame. As shown, frame **13007** includes a resilient hinge element **13080** located in a central portion of the frame and traversing its width. The hinge element may be formed from a TPE or other resilient material that is more flexible than other portions of the frame. The hinge element may also include a reduced thickness region of the frame about which a TPE or other resilient material is disposed. For instance, a proximal portion **13082** of the frame and a distal portion **13084** of the frame may be formed from a relatively rigid material, such as a polypropylene material, and may include a thin neck region (not shown) disposed therebetween. The neck region may permit the proximal and distal portion of the frame to rotate with respect to each other. A resilient material **13081** may surround the neck to dampen rotation about the neck. The resilient material may be adhered to the frame via an adhesive bond, a melt bond or other attachment mechanism, such as a compression fit about the neck.

Hinge element **13080** permits proximal and distal portions **13082** and **13084** respectively of frame **13004** to rotate with respect to one another during use. Thus, head **13010** can generally curl or bend around a surface to be cleaned, such as a user's tooth as illustrated in FIG. **22B**. In addition, hinge element **13080** can simply improve the overall flexibility of the head for adapting to a variety of cleaning features, orientations of use, and applied forces. For instance, as shown in FIG. **22B**, hinge element **13080** can permit frame **13007** to flex like a bow. In another example (not shown), hinge element **13080** can permit the tip portion of the head to be flexed rearward, which will encourage central pod **13050** to move away from the frame as the bridge supports are stretched taut.

Referring now to FIGS. **23A** and **23B**, an oral care implement **13020** is shown that is similar to the embodiment illustrated in FIG. **21** and generally has the same the aspects and features as toothbrush **13000**, except as pertaining to its central pod, the arrangement of cleaning elements **13218**, and the existence of a soft tissue cleaner **13280** disposed on a rear side of its head that is opposite to the front side. The soft tissue cleaner **13280** is generally the same as soft tissue cleaners **10280** and **12280** of FIGS. **10-13** and **19-20** respectively. However, various soft tissue cleaner configurations may be used, such as the soft tissue cleaners of FIGS. **14-18**. Tooth-

16

brush **13020** includes a central pod **13058** that is substantially unitary and lacks elastomeric section **13055** of toothbrush **13000**. Thus, the central pod can provide relatively firm engagement of oral features to be cleaned via the larger rigid central pod, while retaining benefits provided via its suspended configuration. As such, central pod can adapt to the cleaning forces applied to the head by moving fore, aft, sideways and/or downward with respect to the frame. However, its relatively large, rigid size can provide uniform orientation to a large number of cleaning members **13218** attached thereto.

Cleaning elements **13218** extending from the central pod are similar to the cleaning elements **12218** of toothbrush **12000** and generally include the same configuration, aspects and features as cleaning elements **12218** shown in FIG. **19**. However, as central pod **13058** is single pod that spans about the same distance as central pods **12032** and **12034** of toothbrush **12000** in FIG. **19**, central pod **13058** includes additional cleaning elements in its central region. As shown in FIG. **23A**, a central columnar cleaning element **13096** is located at a central portion of the central pod, which is similar to columnar cleaning elements **12270** of toothbrush **12000**. Columnar cleaning element **13096** cooperates with columnar cleaning elements **12270** to effectively penetrate and engage oral surfaces and gaps between surfaces and to transmit downward force to the central pod when excessive cleaning force is applied to the cleaning elements. In addition, several radial cleaning elements **13098** extend from the central columnar cleaning element **13096** in a generally spoke-like configuration at a central region of the central pod. Radial cleaning elements engage features to be cleaned throughout a central portion of the pod, which provide a perimeter structure at side portions of the central pod. The perimeter structure enhances engagement of oral features to be cleaned and can assist with retaining dentifrice within the cleaning elements of the central pod during use.

Referring now to FIGS. **24A** and **24B**, a toothbrush **14000** is shown that is similar to the embodiment illustrated in FIG. **21** and comprises a handle **8103** and a head **14002** having a combination of fixed and suspended cleaning elements. Head **14002** includes a frame **14004**, proximal and distal pods **14010** and **14020** having cleaning elements **14018**, and a single central pod **14050** suspended between the proximal and distal pods. The handle **8103**, head **14002** and proximal and distal pods **14010** and **14020** may be formed as a unitary construction from a thermoplastic, such as polypropylene. A soft tissue cleaner **14280** is generally the same as soft tissue cleaners **10280** and **12280** of FIGS. **10-13** and **19-20** respectively. However, various soft tissue cleaner configurations may be used, such as the soft tissue cleaners of FIGS. **14-18**.

Central pod **14050** has an elastomeric section **14055** disposed in a middle portion of the central pod, or more particularly between a pair of pod segments. The elastomeric section is preferably made from a resilient material, such as a soft thermoplastic elastomer (TPE), while the central pod is preferably made from more rigid material, such as polypropylene. The central pod **14050** is held in place by a molded TPE membrane **14070** that connects with the proximal and distal pods **14010** and **14020** to form bridge supports **14060**. The membrane **14070** may form a loop that encompasses the pair of fixed proximal and distal pods **14010** and **14020** and attaches to opposing sides of central pod **14050**. Grooves (not shown) in side portions of the proximal and distal pods, as well as the central pod, may receive membrane **14070**. In addition, membrane **14070** may be attached to the pods via an adhesive and/or a melt bond, for example.

The cleaning elements **14218** on the central pod **14050** are similar to the configuration of the cleaning elements shown in FIGS. **19** and **20**, with the exception of a plurality of central, flexible cleaning elements **14270** extending from the frame **14004** and protruding through one or more openings (not shown) in the central pod **14050**. Cleaning element **14270** further comprises massaging and/or polishing elements **14272** on its upper surface. While two cleaning elements **14270** are shown, it will be appreciated that only one, or more than two cleaning elements **14270** may be used as desired. Cleaning element **14270** may be attached to the frame **14004**, or extend through the frame **14004** from the soft tissue cleaner **14280** on the opposite side of the head **14002**. If the latter, the cleaning element **14270** may be molded simultaneously with the soft tissue cleaner **14280**. In either case, a unitary structure defined by the membrane **14070** carrying pods **14010**, **14020** and **14050**, could be assembled to the base **14004** over the cleaning element(s) **14270**. Other methods of construction are contemplated.

Membrane **14070** allows the central pod **14050** and cleaning elements **14218** to move toward frame **14004**, guided by the cleaning elements **14270**, when sufficient force is applied during a cleaning operation. Such movement provides additional functionality not described before. One such functionality is a tooth polisher in the middle of the head that is surrounded by fixed and movable cleaning elements **14018**, **14218** respectively. In addition, the cleaning element **14270** includes massaging and/or polishing elements **14272** that are at a fixed height relative to the head **14004**, yet are surrounded by cleaning elements **14218** that recede toward the head **14004** under brushing pressure, enabling the cleaning elements **14272** to be more efficacious during brushing.

When brushing pressure force is applied to the central pod **14050**, segments **14051** and **14053** of the central pod **14050**, as well as the cleaning elements **14270**, will flex about the elastomeric section **14055**. As a result, the cleaning elements **14218** extending from either end of the central pod **14050**, as well as the cleaning elements **14270**, can rotate toward one another. The central pod **14050** can flex back to its original position when the force on the central pod moving it toward the head **14002** diminishes.

Referring now to FIGS. **25A-25E**, a toothbrush **15000A-C** is shown that is similar to the embodiment illustrated in FIGS. **23A** and **23B** and comprises a handle **8103** and a head **15002** having a combination of fixed and suspended cleaning elements. Head **15002** includes a frame **15004**, proximal and distal pods **15010** and **15020** having cleaning elements **15018**, and a central pod **15050** defined by pod segments **15051-15054** (embodiments of FIGS. **25A** through **25D**) or pod segments **15055** through **15058** (embodiment of FIG. **25E**) suspended between the proximal and distal pods. The handle **8103**, head **15002** and proximal and distal pods **15010** and **15020** may be formed as a unitary construction from a thermoplastic, such as polypropylene.

The central pod segments **15051-15058** are held in place by a molded TPE membrane **15070** that connects with the proximal and distal pods **15010** and **15020** to form bridge supports **15060**. The membrane **15070** may form a loop that encompasses the pair of fixed proximal and distal pods **15010** and **15020** and central pod segments **15051-15058**, which segments may be separated by a flexible gap **15062** along the longitudinal axis (embodiment of FIGS. **25A** and **25B**) or lateral axis (embodiment of FIGS. **25C** and **25D**) of the head **15002**. Alternatively, segments **15055-15058** of the embodiment of FIG. **25E** may be separated by a flexible gap **15062** along both the longitudinal and lateral axes of the head. Grooves (not shown) in the pods may receive membrane

15070. In addition, membrane **15070** may be attached to the pods via an adhesive and/or a melt bond, for example.

The cleaning elements **15218** on the central pod segments are similar to the configuration of the cleaning elements shown in FIGS. **23A** and **23B**, with the exception of a central cleaning element **15270** having polishing ridges **15272** along its upper surface that protrudes through an opening (not shown) in the membrane **15070**. Such cleaning element **15270** functions in a similar manner as cleaning element **14270** of FIGS. **24A** and **24B**, relative to the membrane **15070** and the central pod segments **15051**, **15053** of FIGS. **25A** and **25B**. However, because the central pod segments **15051**, **15053** are separated along the longitudinal axis of the head **15002** by a gap **15062**, such segments **15051**, **15053** will tend to rotate away from the protruding cleaning element **15270**, or rotate around the cleaning element **15270**, under brushing pressure, thereby simulating the movement of a bird's wings, resulting in increased efficacy and interproximal penetration. A similar movement is experienced along the transverse axis with segments **15052**, **15054** of FIGS. **24C** and **24D**, and an even more extensive movement is experienced along the longitudinal and transverse axes with segments **15055-15058** of FIG. **25E**. Thus, cleaning element **15270** provides a central pivot around which pod segments **15051-15058** can move.

Cleaning element **15270** may be attached to the frame **15004**, or extend through the frame **15004** from a soft tissue cleaner (not shown) on the opposite side of the head **15002**. If the latter, the cleaning element **15270** may be molded simultaneously with the soft tissue cleaner. In either case, a unitary structure defined by the membrane **15070** carrying pods **15010**, **15020** and central pod segments **15051-15058**, could be assembled to the base **15004** over the cleaning element **15270**. Other methods of construction are contemplated.

As various changes could be made in the above without departing from the scope of the invention, it is intended that all matter contained in this application, including all mechanisms and/or modes of interaction described above, shall be interpreted as illustrative only and not limiting in any way the scope of the appended claims. Further, as noted above, it is intended that oral care implements according to the invention and associated methods may utilize various combinations of aspects, features and configurations discussed within the application.

What is claimed is:

1. An oral care implement comprising:

a handle;

a head attached to the handle and having a first face;

a proximal fixed pod and a distal fixed pod extending from said first face, said pods further comprising a plurality of cleaning elements; and

at least one central pod disposed between and supported above said first face by said pair of fixed pods by at least one suspension member so that a gap exists between a bottom surface of the at least one central pod and the first face, said at least one central pod further comprising a plurality of cleaning elements;

wherein at least a portion of said at least one central pod is movable in a direction normal to said first face.

2. The oral care implement of claim 1, wherein said suspension member is made from a resilient material.

3. The oral care implement of claim 2, wherein said resilient material includes a thermoplastic, a thermoplastic elastomer, a thermoplastic urethane, a plastomer, or combinations thereof.

19

4. The oral care implement of claim 1, wherein said at least one central pod comprises a single pod having at least two groups of cleaning elements extending therefrom.

5. An oral care implement comprising:

a handle;

a head attached to the handle, the head having a base structure having a first face;

a proximal pod extending from the first face of the base structure, the proximal pod being substantially non-movable with respect to the base structure, a plurality of cleaning elements extending from the proximal pod;

a distal pod extending from the first face of the base structure, the distal pod being substantially non-movable with respect to the base structure, a plurality of cleaning elements extending from the distal pod;

at least one central pod disposed between and supported above the first face by the proximal and distal pods by at least one suspension member, a gap existing between a bottom surface of the at least one central pod and the first face of the base structure, a plurality of cleaning elements extending from the at least one central pod; and the at least one central pod being movable with respect to the base structure.

6. The oral care implement of claim 5 wherein the proximal pod, the distal pod and the at least one central pod are aligned along a longitudinal axis of the head.

7. The oral care implement of claim 6 wherein the central pod can twist about a support axis that is substantially parallel to the longitudinal axis of the head.

8. The oral care implement of claim 6 wherein at least a portion of the central pod is movable in a direction normal to said first face.

9. The oral care implement of claim 6 wherein the distal pod forms a distal-most portion of the head and the proximal pod forms a proximal-most portion of the head.

10. The oral care implement of claim 9 wherein the proximal pod, the distal pod, and the base structure are a unitary structure constructed of a rigid material.

11. The oral care implement of claim 10 wherein the at least one central pod is constructed of a rigid material.

12. The oral care implement of claim 6 wherein the at least one central pod has a transverse width that is substantially equal to a transverse width of the base structure.

13. The oral care implement of claim 6 wherein the proximal pod, the distal pod, and the at least one central pod is constructed of a rigid material, and wherein the suspension member is constructed of a resilient material.

14. The oral care implement of claim 13 comprising only one central pod disposed between the proximal pod and the distal pod.

20

15. An oral care implement comprising:

a handle;

a head attached to the handle, the head having a base structure having a first face;

a proximal pod and a distal pod extending from the first face and being static with respect to the base structure, said proximal and distal pods comprising a plurality of cleaning elements extending therefrom;

at least one central pod disposed between and supported above the first face by the proximal and distal pods by a resilient member so that a gap exists between a bottom surface of the at least one central pod and the first face, the at least one central pod comprising a plurality of cleaning elements extending therefrom; and

the resilient member forming a first loop that peripherally surrounds the proximal pod and a second loop that peripherally surrounds the distal pod, the resilient member attached to the at least one central pod.

16. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein the resilient member is a membrane.

17. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein the proximal and distal pods comprise a groove which receives the first and second loops.

18. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein the proximal pod, the distal pod, and the at least one central pod are constructed of a rigid material.

19. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein the proximal pod, the distal pod and the at least one central pod are aligned along a longitudinal axis of the head.

20. The oral care implement of claim 19 wherein the central pod can twist about a support axis that is substantially parallel to the longitudinal axis of the head.

21. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein at least a portion of the central pod is movable in a direction normal to said first face.

22. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein the distal pod forms a distal-most portion of the head and the proximal pod forms a proximal-most portion of the head.

23. The oral care implement of claim 15, wherein said resilient member envelops the at least one central pod.

24. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein the proximal pod, the distal pod, and the base structure are a unitary structure constructed of a rigid material.

25. The oral care implement of claim 15 wherein the at least one central pod has a transverse width that is substantially equal to a transverse width of the base structure.

26. The oral care implement of claim 15 comprising only one central pod disposed between the proximal pod and the distal pod.

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